No Finish Line

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by Fourthlvr

Summary

Norawit's brother once again gets himself into serious trouble because of his own stupidity, but this time, it's far more dangerous than before. In an attempt to fix everything, his older twin brother, Norawit, is forced to take part in an elite race.

However, once he finds himself at the starting line, he is no longer sure he will be able to reach the finish. His main rival will be Nattawat, the very person who trained him for this race, and neither of them was warned that "Powerslide" is not just a race, but a fight for survival.

Chapter 1

"If you're skating on thin ice, skate fast."

Norawit ends every day the same way, trapped in a familiar, looping routine. It's like a worn-out cassette stuck in an old tape player, replaying the same fragment over and over again. After exhausting shifts at work, he usually goes to blow off steam on a familiar track or highway outside the city, or stops by his favorite bar a block away from home to unwind with decent alcohol.

Unfortunately, he's grown especially close to it over the past few years. Late at night, as always, he stumbles back into his tiny apartment, which he rents from a grumpy old woman, and spends a few minutes wrestling with the broken lock on the creaky front door.

Once inside, he shrugs off his jacket and shoes and sinks into the battered blue armchair that's probably smelled faintly of powder and cosmetics for the last fifteen years, ever since its former owner. This is where his looped life pauses.

He sits there for a few minutes every night, eyes closed, simply enduring the dull ache in his neck and the bone-deep exhaustion weighing him down. His muscles ache after work, and more than anything he dreams of a proper massage and a good, hot meal. But neither is happening tonight. He lives completely alone.

Standing over the hoods of a dozen cars every day is meticulous, demanding work, but he likes it. In fact, it's probably the only thing in his life that brings him real pleasure, aside from his motorcycle and the thrill of speed.

Soon he'll wash the scent of engines and oil from his skin, let out a relieved breath, and by morning it will all begin again.

Titicharoenrak glances at the digital clock on his nightstand and sighs deeply, running his fingers through his brown hair. It's well past midnight, and sleep is nowhere in sight. He has to be up in about five hours, but most likely he'll spend the night mindlessly staring at the TV and drinking beer through another bout of insomnia.

That's how his life goes: the same every day, miserable in its own way, yet impossible to call boring. If there's one thing it has in abundance, it's chaos and adrenaline.

All because of one major problem, roughly his height, dark-haired, who almost daily spices up his gray routine with new disasters.

North is his twin brother, born seven minutes later into this damn world twenty-one years ago. Their faces are almost identical, but inside, they're completely different. North takes after their father, while Norawit is more like their mother. Despite the rough patches in their relationship, even from a distance Norawit always senses when something is wrong with his brother. The feeling grows especially strong at night, when North has an uncanny talent for getting into trouble, and Norawit inevitably ends up rushing in to save his ass. He doesn't know how to do otherwise.

He loves him with everything he has.

They share a closeness many people don't understand, a strange and special bond. They say twins are connected by an invisible thread, able to feel each other no matter the distance. That was true for them for a long time. Even though they share not only one face but a soul split in two, lately they've been drifting apart. Secrets are starting to appear between them, and Norawit hates it.

He heads to the bathroom, stripping as he goes and leaving a trail of clothes down the hallway, just like always. The best feeling of the entire day is when hot water pours steadily over his head, neck, and shoulders, sending shivers across his skin. It's intoxicatingly relaxing, like breathing life back into his body.

He tilts his head back, eyes closed, letting the water stream over his face. He likes standing there for a few quiet minutes, thinking about nothing at all, before finally washing away the smell of oil and gasoline.

He loves the clean feeling on his skin afterward, the way it leaves behind a completely different, dangerously pleasant scent. It feels good to end a long day simply clean. Being rested, though, would be even better.

After the shower, he heads straight for his empty fridge. As usual, it contains only beer, frozen meals, leftovers from delivery, and milk, which his small white friend loves most. Titicharoenrak chews on a leftover slice of pizza, generously fills the cat's bowl to the brim with food, grabs a bottle of alcohol, and goes in search of his roommate.

"Jumu?" he calls, looking around. "Where are you, buddy?"

A small bell jingles from the next room, and Norawit shuffles toward the sound. The cat responds with a quiet purr, stretching lazily across the big bed when he spots his wayward owner. His content little face and the soft sound of greeting melt Norawit instantly, and he can't help but smile. The only living creature in the world capable of breaking through his defenses so easily is now rubbing affectionately against his hand, asking for just a bit of love.

That's all he needs to be happy.

The only one who always misses him and waits at home. For a whole year now.

Titicharoenrak lies down beside him, turns on the TV, and half-heartedly flips through channels. As always, Jumu immediately climbs up to his face, nudging his cheek with a wet nose, purring at full volume in gratitude. Norawit grins stupidly and kisses the top of his head between his tiny ears.

Truth is, he never planned on keeping him.

The night they met, he was coming home late and found a tiny kitten in an alley. Alone, shaking from cold and hunger, one ear torn from a fight. He'd felt sorry for the poor thing. Strangely enough, the kitten reminded him of North, and of himself. Just as lonely. Just as unwanted. He meant to take him in temporarily, nurse him back to health, then give him up to a shelter. But somehow, Jumu softened his heart.

He always climbed into Norawit's bed at night, curling against him, searching for safety. He never demanded much attention, simply stayed close, and little by little earned absolute devotion.

Taking responsibility for another life isn't easy. When you tame someone, you accept the role of protector, caretaker, and shield forever. It's a heavy choice. But Norawit had already made it once, when he took responsibility for his younger brother's life. This time, it came easier.

Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes he doesn't want to do it. But he knows he has to. You can't abandon a small creature that's grown used to you, that loves you with the purest love there is, even on days when everything drives you insane. One troublemaker brings endless problems, the other scratches furniture, shreds wallpaper, and chews on everything in sight. But the moment either of them shows their softer side, he melts.

"Sorry, baby," he murmurs. "I was a shitty dad again and came home late. Missed me?"

The cat purrs even louder and curls up by his shoulder. Norawit smiles softly and scratches behind his ear. The little ball of fur has grown so much. He can't even remember what life was like without him. That gentle sound of purring relaxes him and melts away stress better than alcohol or speed ever could. Keeping him was the best decision he's made.

Titicharoenrak tosses an arm behind his head and watches some boring Netflix series. For some reason, he keeps glancing anxiously at the clock, nerves tightening with every minute. Something unpleasant stirs in his chest, a feeling he knows all too well.

North.

He has more than enough reasons to worry about his brother, and with time, there are only more. A vicious cycle. He can't pull him out of it, but abandoning him isn't in his nature. North's mental health is in bad shape. On top of that, he's developed a drug habit, making everything worse. More and more often, he escapes that way instead of just drinking, and no matter how hard Norawit tries to make him stop, North doesn't listen.

It terrifies him. Norawit knows exactly how this can end, and he's not ready to lose another person he loves.

Despite the unexplainable knot of anxiety tightening in his chest, he still dials his brother's number. It's better to make sure it's just paranoia than to sit and wait for something truly bad to happen. As far as he knows, North has another fight tonight, and afterward, as always, he'll go celebrate his victory at a club with his friends. So it's unlikely he'll answer, but what if he hears it anyway?

The line rings for a long time before the voicemail clicks on.

"Of course," he exhales in frustration, rubbing his tired eyes.

Lately, North almost never answers his calls, and he never calls first — unless he needs something. Most of the time, he's busy getting himself into yet another mess. Even though there are only seven minutes between them, Norawit feels like a full-fledged parent to him. The older, caring brother who had to become both father and mother when he himself was still barely a kid. He had to grow up too early, much earlier than North ever did.

Sometimes it feels like his younger brother never really grew up at all.

That crushing sense of responsibility often plays cruel tricks on him, but there's nothing he can do about it. They have no one but each other. No one else will save him. And if Norawit doesn't, one day North will either overdose or get himself killed because of the trouble he keeps dragging home.

Titicharoenrak stares blankly at the television screen. The flickering light from shifting images jumps across the walls and his face, the only source of illumination in the room. His thoughts drift far away.

What will happen to them next?

How long can they keep living like this if nothing changes?

How much longer will he have the strength to keep dragging North out of disasters by the collar?

Will there ever be a night when he can fall asleep peacefully, without that constant ache of dread in his chest? A day when he isn't afraid for him?

He's so damn tired of all of it. Until his brother confronts his inner demons and destructive addictions, Norawit will always live wrapped in paranoia.

The sharp ring of his phone cuts through his thoughts, and his heart immediately starts racing — already knowing what he's about to hear. Their mutual friend's name lights up the screen, and that alone tells him everything. If North weren't in trouble, he wouldn't be calling at this hour.

Norawit sits up on the bed, reluctantly swipes to answer, and lowers the volume of the show.

"I'm listening, Phu," he says.

"Hey, baby. I need help," his best friend says without preamble.

"Would it kill you to call in the middle of the night with good news for once?" Norawit sighs.

"Sorry, baby. Not tonight."

From the other end of the line come pounding bass, overlapping voices, sounds that resemble a fight, and frightened female screams.

Fuck. What the hell is going on there this time? What did he get himself into now?

"What's happening? Is he alive?"

"Yeah, alive. Drunk out of his mind. We're at a club, Norawit. Your brother completely lost it."

“What did he do now?” Norawit asks, leaning his elbow on his knee and raking a hand through his hair.

“He’s fighting. I don’t know how to calm him down. Everyone’s catching strays, even our own guys. Please come. I know I promised not to bother you over small stuff, but he’s uncontrollable. He’s smashed so much alcohol we can’t pay for the damage. I’d handle it myself, but I need to deal with him first before he kills someone,” Phu shouts, barely audible over the music.

“Alright,” Norawit exhales, dragging a hand down his face. “I’m on my way. What club? Is it far?”

“Invictus.”

What the fuck?

That’s one of the most expensive places in the city, and he decided to cause a scene there? Perfect, North. Couldn’t have picked a worse spot. This time, it won’t end so easily. Owners of places like that don’t do things the nice way. They always have to show off.

Norawit moves quickly. He throws on his jacket, gently pets sleepy Jumu, and heads out again, leaving him alone behind him.

He was right. This was the city's most mainstream, high-profile club. Top DJs from all over the world performed here, massive lines formed every night, everything operated at the highest level, and the crowd consisted of flashy young people with thick wallets and model-pretty girls on their arms. The place looked obscenely luxurious.

Even though Norawit had never been inside, it was obvious from the entrance alone that something lavish and beautiful awaited within. The building's façade was framed by massive columns, illuminated by discreet spotlights that scattered light dramatically along the perimeter. A red carpet stretched toward the main entrance, bordered by barriers strung with crimson ribbons. It felt less like a club entrance and more like the Oscars red carpet.

Seriously, how had North even gotten in? The face control here was brutal. They judged by clothes and looks, and he definitely failed the first criterion. Norawit glanced down at his jeans and leather jacket, then back at the impeccably dressed guests standing in a long, orderly line. Did people really put this much effort into dressing up just to go clubbing? It was almost absurd how seriously they took it.

He stood off to the side, smoking calmly, weighing his chances of getting inside quietly and without trouble. Girls kept throwing curious glances his way, and even a few men seemed to catch themselves wondering why the hell he was so attractive. It was always amusing to watch the split second of gay panic flash across their faces whenever he winked or made a deliberately suggestive comment, just to enjoy their reactions. They were always thrown off by his pretty face, never expecting the sharp tongue and unapologetic boldness hiding underneath. What they only dared to think to themselves, he usually said out loud, and it hit them like a blow to the head every time.

Norawit knew that if he stood in line for an hour, he'd lose precious time. North could do far more damage by then, or accidentally kill someone. He flicked his cigarette away and walked along the barrier, bypassing the line entirely. Protests erupted immediately, irritated voices following him as people realized what he was doing. Norawit answered them with a smug grin and kept going.

Someone shouted something like "son of a bitch" after him. Norawit turned around, caught the man's eye, shrugged, gave him a sly smile, and winked.

He hopped over the ribbon and stopped in front of two girls in expensive cocktail dresses.

"Hey, you. End of the line. No exceptions," the guard said, pointing at him.

“It’s in your best interest to let me through,” Norawit replied calmly.

“Didn’t you hear me? End of the line. Everyone wants to get in. No special orders from the boss.”

“Fine. I’ll leave. But then there’ll be no one to cover the damages.”

The guard frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“My brother’s inside causing a scene and racking up a very expensive tab. He’ll disappear either way, and the loss will come out of your already-not-so-great paycheck. You really want that?” Norawit asked, arching a brow.

“So that idiot who trashed the bar is your brother?”

“Yep. That’s him. My little brother,” Norawit said, smiling innocently.

The guard sighed and sized him up from head to toe.

“You don’t fit the dress code.”

“I’m not here to party. Either you let me in and I handle your brother-shaped problem, or you and the staff pay for the broken alcohol. I know exactly how this works.”

“I need to check with the boss. We don’t usually let people in like this unless they’re a plus-one or explicitly approved,” the guard replied.

“Sure. Take your time. A few hundred more or less won’t make much difference once he’s destroyed premium liquor,” Norawit laughed lightly, brushing his hair back.

“…Fine,” the man said at last, nodding to his partner. “Take him in. Better to earn than to pay.”

The heavy doors opened, and Norawit followed him inside. Loud music pounded through the space, strobe lights flashing in sharp bursts of color. The club wasn’t as large as it looked from the outside, but its interior radiated wealth and deliberate extravagance. Clean lines, precise geometry, minimal accessories so nothing distracted from the core aesthetic. The décor defied typical nightclub comfort, no screaming colors, only dark, cool, neutral tones. High ceilings, smart zoning. Everything here was designed for comfort and function, every detail thoughtfully placed.

A spacious dance floor sprawled across the center for those who wanted to party all night, while a cozy lounge area near the stage catered to guests who preferred drinks and conversation. Elegant furniture with perfect silhouettes filled the space, hidden lighting accentuated the ceiling levels, and adjustable spotlights guided attention where it was meant to go.

The upper floor was enclosed by wrought-iron railings — VIP seating. Clearly not a place for ordinary mortals like him. Norawit glanced up and noticed a man leaning over the railing, observing the scene below with a satisfied smile. His posture was relaxed, confident. The owner, most likely. Judging by his expression, definitely. So that was who he’d have to deal with next.

The bar stretched almost the entire length of the wall, glowing under bright backlighting. Norawit immediately noticed shattered glass shelves and broken bottles, as if something had been thrown with force. A bartender in uniform was sweeping up shards, the sharp smell of spilled alcohol hanging thick in the air.

Near the hallway leading to the smoking area, chaos erupted. People crowded together, sudden movements flashing — a fight. Norawit spotted his brother’s dark hair instantly, darting between bodies, and Phuwin nearby. Guards grabbed North, wrenching his arms behind his back as he shouted something aggressive over the music. He lunged at someone, elbowing one of the guards in the nose by accident.

“Shit,” Norawit muttered, already moving.

Phuwin was trying to calm North down, holding his face between his hands and shouting at him. He looked terrified by everything that had happened. A few other familiar faces tried to restrain North too, but his eyes were glazed, blind with rage. Norawit knew this state all too well. In moments like this, his brother saw and heard nothing. Rage took over completely, and he lost all control. Right now, he was capable of anything.

Norawit rushed forward and placed his hands on North's neck, checking him quickly. Scrapes marked his cheek, blood smeared near his shaved eyebrow, like he'd been hit with something heavy. His eyes were wild. He didn't seem high, but the stench of alcohol was overwhelming. Drunk again.

North lifted furious eyes toward him, breathing hard, clearly not recognizing who stood in front of him. He snarled and jerked violently as the guards tightened their grip again.

"Hey! Take it easy!" Phuwin snapped. "Stop handling him like that!"

"Get the hell off me!" North yelled.

"It's me. It's me, do you hear me?" Norawit said gently, trying to cut through the rage. "Easy. It's me. Listen to my voice."

"Let go of me!"

Norawit stroked his fingers along his neck and looked straight into his furious eyes.

"Who dares offend the moon so bright?

So full it was just yesterday,

Yet now it fades before the night.

What gives it strength to stay?"

He whispered the painfully familiar rhyme into his ear.

It worked like a handbrake. North froze for a few seconds, breathing heavily, childhood memories slowly breaking through. Hearing those words every night before sleep. Hearing them whenever he was scared. His older brother always there, holding his hand, reciting them to calm the storm inside him.

“And spite its enemies with light,” North finished faintly. “Norawit.”

“Yeah. Calm down, okay? You’ve already caused enough trouble. Breathe. Close your eyes. Just breathe. Did you take anything?”

“No,” North murmured, blinking slowly. “Just drank.”

“Good,” Norawit nodded, pulling him into a hug. “Let him go. He’s calming down.”

The guards released him, and North clung to his brother immediately, holding him so tightly it hurt Norawit’s ribs. He endured it without complaint, stroking his hair like a child. Like North was eleven again, and Norawit was the only thing standing between him and the world. It had always been that way. It always would be. He would never leave him alone when he needed him.

North trembled violently, rage still tearing through him. He closed his eyes and inhaled the familiar scent of his brother’s skin. That smell reminded him that someone loved him — fiercely, unconditionally. It grounded him every time. Like an anchor pulling him back to reality when he slipped away. Norawit’s care was home. He was home. Without him, the world fell apart.

“It’s okay. I’m here,” Norawit whispered. “Everything’s okay. Go outside and we’ll head home. I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep.”

“And you?”

“I’ll talk to the club owner and join you. Stay with Phuwin for now.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’ll fix everything. I’ll pay for the damage—”

“Shut up,” Norawit said gently, cupping his face. “Go outside and get some air. Cool down. Don’t take anything else. I’ll be there soon. I promise.”

North’s eyes cleared noticeably. He nodded slowly, and Phuwin guided him out of the club.

Norawit exhaled heavily, biting his lip as he watched his brother’s slumped shoulders disappear. Guilt always followed — endless apologies, then another disaster. Each time it grew harder to pull him back. For now, Norawit was the only one North allowed close in moments like this. But one day, he might not be there. Or it might stop working.

The thought alone was terrifying.

Norawit ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face, and lifted his guarded gaze toward the VIP section.

The guy in the black suit, his shirt perfectly matched, watches everything unfold with undisguised interest, sipping something from a small glass. Arrogance radiates off him from a mile away. Another spoiled idiot, the son of some rich bastard who thinks he owns the world just because he has money and power over other people’s lives.

The stranger suddenly points at him and crooks two fingers, beckoning him over as if calling a guard dog. Then he leans both palms against the railing, never taking his dark eyes off him. Damn it.

“Boss…”

“Yeah. I got it,” Norawit says, already moving past the guard toward the club owner.

He climbs the wrought-iron staircase and steps into an area closed off to regular guests. Clearly a private space, reserved for the owner and his most important company. A few men and women lounge on black sofas, quietly talking among themselves, drinks in hand, completely uninterested in his presence.

The arrogant guy finally turns around, slowly and deliberately, raking his gaze over Norawit from head to toe. Norawit doesn’t back down. He’s not the type to be rattled by looks like that.

He lifts a brow and gives him the same bold, unapologetic inspection. Not bad. Definitely his type, though painfully irritating. Attractive, with thick black hair slicked back, warm brown eyes narrowed in something almost playful, a neat nose, and an annoyingly charming smile. Maybe a little younger, or the same age, but he carries himself like someone who knows he has the upper hand. Like he feels far older than his years. Just like Norawit.

He finishes his drink slowly and smirks lazily.

“So you’re the one taking responsibility for what your friend did?”

“He’s my brother. And yes, I’ll take responsibility.”

“You always clean up after him when he fucks up like a little kid?” he asks shamelessly.

“That’s none of your business,” Norawit snaps. “What’s the problem? Do you really care who pays for the damage?”

“Honestly? Not really,” the guy shrugs.

“How much does he owe?”

“About ten grand, I’d say.”

“Fuck,” Norawit mutters under his breath, dragging a hand through his hair.

“What? Is that a problem?” the man asks, raising a brow with a grin.

“I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Then find it. I’ll give you time.”

“Easy for you to say when you’re drowning in it,” Norawit scoffs, nodding at his expensive watch. “I don’t have ten thousand to hand over to some random self-obsessed asshole. That’s weeks of work for me.”

“Then work it off.”

“How?”

“You tell me. What can you do?” the club owner asks, shrugging indifferently.

“I can suck your dick really well. Offer’s valid for five seconds,” Norawit says, lifting his chin defiantly and curling his fingers as he counts. “One, two, five… oops. Too late.”

“You’ve got guts,” the stranger chuckles.

“And it’s dark at night. Are we trading obvious facts about life, or are we solving this?”

The man studies him for a few seconds, eyes narrowing in thought. Clearly, he won't be getting the money anytime soon. Norawit doesn't have it and won't magically find it. Still, letting this slide without consequences isn't an option. His brother caused trouble and dumped it all on him. And judging by how easily he stepped in earlier, this isn't the first time.

The club owner saw it clearly: the aggressive guest only calmed down because of him. The brother has issues, probably with alcohol, maybe worse, and this guy keeps pulling him out of messes. The feeling is familiar. He has a problematic brother too, one he occasionally has to save. Though maybe not to this extent.

The man standing in front of him would do anything to protect his family.

Maybe that deserves a little help.

"Why do you go this far for him?" he asks, genuinely curious.

"We're twins. His problems are my problems," Norawit replies.

"Hm," the man smiles faintly, rubbing his chin with slender fingers. "Does he have issues with alcohol? Or did he just overdo it?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm trying to figure out if helping you is fair. If he did this for no real reason, it's not exactly right that you're the one paying for it. It's his mistake. Let him come talk to me himself. I won't eat him."

"He's got plenty of problems. Alcohol's one of them," Norawit says coldly. "Leave him alone. I'll work off his mistake."

He turns and heads for the stairs.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Listen, I’ve had a shitty day, and I’m not in the mood for heart-to-heart talks,” Norawit throws over his shoulder. “Decide what kind of work you want and come find me.”

“And you think I’ll believe you won’t just disappear?” the club owner scoffs.

Norawit stops and lets out a sharp breath, shaking his head. He’s heard that line way too many times from idiots whose debts he covered for North.

“My name’s Norawit Titicharoenrak. I work at an auto shop. Sotel district. You’ll find me easily, I practically live there,” he says, lifting his pinky. “Scout’s honor. Reach out if you need me. What was your name again?”

“Night Jirochtikul.”

“I’ll call you Rich Idiot. See you around.”

He heads down the stairs and toward the exit, while Night watches him go, curiosity gleaming in his eyes and a slow, intrigued smile tugging at his lips.

Chapter 2: II

If you think about it logically, the most vulnerable and fragile element when riding a motorcycle is the rider himself. He's barely protected from injury or a tragic end on the road. Knowing how to handle the machine isn't enough. You have to feel it, and for many reckless car racers, riding a bike turns out to be far more difficult than they expect. You need to keep far greater control over every situation than you do in a car, and you can't relax for even a single moment. You have to trust yourself and your machine completely. A lot of people never manage to truly enjoy it because of the constant tension.

Almost anyone who isn't afraid of speed can floor it down the road inside a steel box, but mastering a motorcycle is something not everyone is capable of. Choosing this kind of riding isn't a necessity. It's a privilege for the brave. It's hard to explain this passion to people who are far removed from it, or why you spend so much time next to a piece of metal. A bike is convenient in many ways, but the main reason people choose it is the sensation. The thrill and adrenaline you can't get anywhere else. Every ride feels like walking on thin ice or balancing on the edge of a blade, a constant race against death.

Norawit loves that intoxicating rush, the moment when a powerful stream of wind pierces his body and whistles in his ears. He loves the way everything inside him tingles pleasantly from the growling engine beneath him. What excites him most is how every emotion sharpens to its absolute limit while he's riding. When he gets on the bike, he's fully aware of how fatal even the smallest mistake on the road could be, and what it would cost him. But that awareness gives him a sense of control.

It's a high-stakes gamble with his own life, a game he wants to play again and again, just not all the way to the end. The most important thing is not to cross that thin line, not to give in to the urge to take even more risks than you already are. When adrenaline floods your blood, it's dangerously easy to lose yourself, and then it's over. You have to watch your speed. That's the one rule you should never forget, no matter how intoxicating it feels. Perceiving speed on the road is closely tied to how you perceive time. It's a skill that takes more than a day to develop, and more importantly, you need to understand what it's made of, because the human body is easily deceived.

Titicharoenrak learned all of this on his own. He first got on a motorcycle before he was even sixteen. One of the older guys offered to let him try, and it was love at first daring roar. His first and only love. In truth, though, this passion had always been in his blood. North loved it just as fiercely, and their father had been obsessed with motorcycles when he was young. He used to say that if he died on one, it would be a happy moment for him. Because happiness, he said, is the stretch of time between starting the engine and shutting it off with a smile after the ride. Those few minutes give you a feeling nothing else in the world ever could, and now Norawit understood his words perfectly.

When he tore through traffic at high speed, he felt a strange sense of solitude and freedom. That was when he was happy, and he didn't want to share that feeling with anyone.

He slows down at a traffic light and comes to a smooth stop. He glances cautiously around and hears the sound of another engine beside him. In the neighboring lane, a familiar dark-green car pulls up, pop music blasting at full volume as always. Phuwin leans out the window and winks at him. He flashes that charming smile and adjusts the headband pushing his chestnut hair back.

"Hey, baby Gem," he says.

"Hey, cipher," Titicharoenrak laughs.

"How's life, old man?"

"Been better. But seeing you already helps."

"I always say I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."

"Idiot."

"Takes one to know one."

"Can't argue with facts."

"So, same as always? From the light to the Loop?" his friend suggests, wiggling his eyebrows provocatively.

"I'll beat you again. Relax already."

"Norawit Titicharoenrak, don't be so confident. I'm pretty damn good at this."

"Beat me a couple of times and you still can't get over it?" he laughs again. "You just got lucky."

"Oh yeah? Afraid of losing to me? That's what I thought."

"What are we racing for?" Titicharoenrak grins, settling more comfortably on his bike.

"Loser buys the beer. Same as always," Phuwin says, glancing at the road.

"Get your card ready."

Someone honks at Tangsakyuen in irritation, and he flips them off before climbing back into the car and revving the engine hard. Norawit lowers the visor of his helmet and twists the throttle in response, signaling that he's ready, his eyes fixed on the traffic light. A pleasant sense of anticipation builds inside him, his heart racing wildly.

"Three, two, one," he counts the red numbers out loud, and the moment the light turns green, they launch forward.

A playful race down a busy street is their favorite kind of entertainment. Who wouldn't want to show off a little and get another hit of adrenaline? Especially since for Titicharoenrak it's almost always an easy win. He weaves between cars effortlessly, while Phuwin is forced into dangerous lane-cutting because of the size of his vehicle. It's fun, if only because most people in traffic can't do anything like this and are probably envying them right now. They watch with obvious regret, wishing they could live like that, and it feels good to have something others don't.

Most of those people live dull, repetitive lives, and a motorcycle or a racing car is nothing more than an unattainable childhood dream for them. Maybe these racers don't have the best lives either, but at least theirs are exciting.

Phuwin sticks close behind, maneuvering smoothly between cars while bold music blasts inside his car. He really is good at racing, having been into it for years. There's a joyful smile on his face, and he doesn't try too hard to overtake Titicharoenrak, knowing Norawit will pass him sooner or later anyway. He enjoys the process, not the result. Sure, it's nice to occasionally knock a worthy rival down a peg, but that feeling when excitement trembles inside you and spreads through your body in tingles all the way to your fingertips can't be compared to anything else.

He laughs when his opponent slips between two cars right in front of his nose and glances back at him, then just shrugs. Norawit, of course, surges ahead and flies through the next intersection on a red light amid blaring horns, while Phuwin is forced to stay in his lane and watch the distance between them grow.

Titicharoenrak arrives quickly at a place well known to all adrenaline junkies. The Loop. A racing track where anyone can test their skills. You can come here just to have fun when the track is empty, or you can take part in real races. The place belongs to a guy everyone knows, Pond Naravit, and it's equipped so well it resembles a Formula One track. You could hold a race of that level here at any moment.

You can win real money at the Loop. Everything depends on whether you can win and place in the top three. Spectators place bets, and you get a percentage if you finish second or third. If you come in first, you get twice as much as everyone else. Registration usually happens in advance, with races scheduled weeks ahead, but sometimes Pond makes exceptions for close friends. To avoid confusion and ugly disputes, he separates race days for cars and bikes. They alternate, which suits everyone just fine since the crowds are different. Today, as it happens, is car day.

Norawit pulls into the parking lot near the track and is surprised by how many people are there. Rows upon rows of tuned cars stretch from the entrance all the way to the gates leading to the track. Loud music and the noise of voices fill the air from every direction. People are drinking, dancing, and having a good time. Everyone is showing off their cars and how extensively they've been upgraded according to the highest standards of car culture. There's something for every taste here, all kinds of models in every color imaginable.

The street racing crowd is massive, much larger than the group of bikers that usually gathers on their days. He doesn't come to watch their races often, but it's still impressive, and sometimes he likes to cheer on his friends. It's easy to see why there are so many curious

onlookers. Just watching is enough to get your nerves buzzing. But it's even more exciting to witness street races when they spill out from here and straight into the city's busiest districts.

Spectators crowd around the cars, examining them with interest and chatting with the racers, while others have already taken their places in the designated areas around the track so they won't miss the spectacular run. Titicharoenrak takes off his helmet and runs a hand through his hair, glancing around. Then he spots a familiar figure leaning over a hood and smirks in satisfaction.

Long, slender legs in heavy combat boots. Short shorts. A leather jacket. He'd recognize that ass from any angle, anytime, anywhere.

Pahn, his old friend of many years. She's a cool girl, and if they hadn't firmly locked each other into the friend zone, they'd probably have been having fun together like a real couple by now. Though, to be fair, they had slept together a couple of times while drunk, but neither of them wanted anything more than that.

Norawit strolls up behind her and gives her a solid smack on her pert, tempting ass clad in black shorts. The girl rolls her eyes and smiles. There's only one person who dares behave like that with her. Anyone else who tried something like this would already be walking around with a broken nose or jaw.

"Hey, Norawit," she says without even turning around.

"Hey, Pahn," he laughs. "What are you doing?"

"Checking if everything's ready. Don't distract me."

"Need help? I am a mechanic, you know."

"Oh please, Norawit," she laughs back. "I know her insides better than you do."

She adjusts some wires, then slams the hood shut. Wiping her hands, she pulls him into a tight hug and pats his shoulders. Norawit smiles and looks over her black car, a pink panther painted boldly across the hood. It suits her perfectly, just as playful and affectionate as its owner, but ready to rip your head off and devour it in one bite if needed.

Pahn is a reckless racer obsessed with cars and a wild hacker who can crack any traffic light system without breaking a sweat. Thanks to her work, street races can take place across the city without trouble, she plots the routes and toys with the road services, breaking into their control systems. She's pure chaos, the kind of girl any party would be boring without. Beneath her soft inner world lies an iron-hard character. A real girl with more balls than some men.

Titicharoenrak gently ruffles her long hair, dyed in an ombré of dark blue fading into light blue, and gives her a playful wink. Pahn hops onto the hood of her car, lights a cigarette, and exhales thick clouds of smoke through her full lips. He does the same, watching as more cars pull in.

Some are battered and old. Most are flashy, covered in custom airbrushing, neon lights, and spoilers. But then there are others, sleek, expensive supercars worth millions. Those belong, of course, to the elite racers here, the golden youth who love to mingle among the underground crowd. Sometimes they even bet these beauties in races. For them, it's just another thrill in their rich lives. For regular people, it's a real chance to win the car of their childhood dreams.

Winning one of those here is probably everyone's fantasy. Even Norawit, who loves bikes far more, can't help glancing with quiet envy at one particular beauty driven by a well-known asshole.

"You racing tonight?" he asks, turning to Pahn and blowing smoke through his nose.

"Of course."

"Then I'll stay and cheer for you."

"Better bet on me. I need the money," she laughs.

"Big bets on you tonight?"

"About thirty percent."

"Mmm," Titicharoenrak hums, impressed, taking a deep drag. "Not bad."

"Yeah. If I place in the top three, I'll make something tonight."

"Top three? You kidding? You'll tear them all apart, baby," Norawit says, throwing an arm around her shoulders and kissing her temple.

"Damn it," Pahn groans irritably.

"What?" he asks.

She nods toward the road. Norawit turns and sees a black Mustang pulling up to the Loop, its hood adorned with a massive, breathtaking dragon that stretches all the way onto the roof. Red neon glows under the wheels, music pounding from the half-open window.

A gorgeous, unmistakable car.

Behind the wheel sits a guy in a dark bucket hat pulled low over his face. It's impossible to get a good look, people instantly swarm the car, cheering and whistling loudly. Well damn. Looks like he's got his own fan army here. Some kind of local star?

Norawit frowns and looks at Pahn.

"And who's that?"

"Natt," she sighs, flicking away her cigarette. "Now I definitely won't win."

“Who the hell is Natt?”

“The drift king of the Loop.”

“Aren’t these regular races?”

“Drifting isn’t forbidden. And no one does it better than Natt. When he races, nobody can even get half a car ahead of him.”

“He that good?” Norawit snorts.

“Him? He’s basically a god, buddy. A couple years ago, he won a race in Osaka. Took home an elite supercar and a huge cash prize. You know what level that is. A foreigner winning in the birthplace of top-tier drifting? That’s something.”

“Interesting,” Norawit murmurs, watching the Mustang roll toward the track and park.

A few seconds later, the driver steps out. He’s wearing an open black-and-white checkered shirt over a T-shirt. He nods casually to a few people, then heads straight toward Pond, probably to discuss the race, or maybe they’re just friends. He looks cocky, self-assured, completely unfazed by the crowd practically losing their minds over him.

Maybe he really is worth watching.

“Fuck you, I’ll get the beer,” Phu says, stepping out of his car.

“Told you you’d lose,” Titicharoenrak laughs, turning to him.

“Still worth trying. It’s fun,” Phu replies, and they do their signature handshake.

“You racing tonight?”

“In the same lineup as the dragon? No thanks. I’m good, but I can’t beat him in the turns. That kind of technique takes years to master,” Tangsakyuen laughs.

“I’ll try,” Pahn says.

“You’re insane,” Tangsakyuen says, hugging her. “Never doubted you were crazy, blue head and all.”

“So he’s really that legendary? Why haven’t I heard of him before?” Norawit asks.

“How often do you hang out with street racers?” his friend arches a brow.

“Well… yeah,” Norawit shrugs.

“Exactly. You’ve got your kings. We’ve got ours.”

“Alright then. Let’s see what he can do. You’ve got me curious.”

They leave Pahn to prepare and head toward the spectator stands, fenced off for safety. Titicharoenrak rests a hand on his friend's shoulder, his eyes fixed on the figure in dark clothes and a bucket hat near the observation booth. Pond chats easily with Natt, then pulls him into a warm hug before they part ways.

Strange that Norawit's never heard of him before, even though he's been around here for years. Then again, he never cared much for car racing, motorcycles always held his heart.

The racers line up at the starting line, and the crowd holds its breath. So this is what they feel when Norawit himself waits at the start? The thrill is just as intense, even as a spectator. Except here, you don't risk crashing at any second.

Phuwin cups his hands and shouts at the top of his lungs, "Pahn, kick those losers' asses!" then whistles loudly with his fingers in his mouth. The crowd erupts, and goosebumps ripple across Norawit's skin. This isn't a professional race, but the rush is unreal even just watching.

A beautiful girl in a short top and skirt clicks her heels as she walks to the start line, standing between the cars. She asks if everyone's ready. One by one, the racers rev their engines in response. She starts the countdown, then snaps her arms down.

The cars launch forward, leaving her engulfed in smoke as the crowd goes insane.

The Mustang immediately surges ahead, refusing to let anyone close. Some try, nearly catching up, but at every turn they're forced to slow down to avoid smashing into the barriers. Natt, on the other hand, slides through sideways in perfect, controlled drifts.

It's stunning. Every movement precise. The car glides through thick smoke like it's part of a slow-motion Hollywood shot. The crowd adores him, and he knows exactly how to give them a show, for them and for himself. His driving is wild, impulsive, almost insane. Even for street racing, it's reckless. He's clearly fearless, the kind of person who could easily cross the line and lose control if he wanted to.

"Holy shit, he's insane," Norawit mutters as the Mustang pulls even farther ahead.

"Yeah, but a cool kind of insane," Tangsakyuen cheers, whistling.

Natt drifts cleanly through the final turn, accelerates hard, and finishes effortlessly. Pahn takes second, leaving the rest trailing behind her pink panther.

Norawit claps along with the crowd, then glances to the side.

On the far end of the Loop, where there are barely any cars or people due to the dimly lit parking lot, he catches a glimpse of his brother. North stands talking to some shady-looking guy. An SUV is parked nearby, with several men hanging around like bodyguards.

What the hell is this now? What mess has he gotten himself into this time?

The guy looks like trouble, with money. What could they possibly have in common besides problems? Exactly. Nothing.

Norawit quickly leaves the spectator area and heads toward where he saw his brother. He slips between the stands and exits through a side door into the parking lot. From here, it's easier to see what's going on.

North is talking to a smug, rich bastard, judging by his clothes. A pristine white shirt and a suit more perfect than their entire lives. The man radiates danger and trouble, and Norawit hates it instantly. The guy speaks to North harshly, then gets into his luxury car and drives off with his security.

Great. Just what they needed.

"Care to explain what you screwed up this time?" Norawit asks, stepping out of the shadows.

"What are you talking about?" North asks, glancing around nervously.

"Don't play dumb," Norawit snaps.

"Norawit, calm down. Everything's fine."

"Are you kidding me?" Norawit shouts, grabbing him by the collar. "What did you do? Who was that? What does he want from you?"

"He's just someone I know. Nothing serious. Chill."

"What kind of business do you have with someone like that? You think I'm stupid? I know exactly how these meetings usually end, for us."

"I don't have any problems with him. We were just talking."

"He didn't look very polite. Who is he?"

"…Damien," North mutters, turning away. "His name's Damien. He's been letting me use a building for fights these past few months."

"I thought you handled that yourself. Are you working for him now?" Norawit asks, releasing him.

"Something like that. Before, fights happened wherever I could arrange them. Now it's always his place. I organize everything like I used to."

"Sounds too smooth. Why would someone like him want that?"

"Bets. They secretly bet on the fighters and watch."

"They?" Norawit raises a brow.

"Him and his friends. Rich assholes who enjoy bloodshed for money. The more of them there are, the bigger my cut, for wins and organization."

“So they bet on you?” Norawit frowns. “They’re making money off you? That why you fight almost every day? Have you completely lost your mind?”

“I’m just creating a show. Relax. Don’t panic. I’m their favorite because my fights are beautiful. People bet on me more than anyone else.”

“Something’s off. Are you getting anything else from them?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Don’t lie. I know when you’re lying,” Norawit growls, pointing a finger at him.

“Get off my back! You always make drama out of nothing!” North snaps.

“What hole did you crawl into this time, North? Tell me now so I know what kind of shit I’ll have to drag you out of!” Norawit yells.

“Fuck you! I didn’t ask you to!”

“If I hadn’t helped, you’d either be dead or rotting in prison by now! You could at least say thank you!”

“For what?! For wiping my ass like I’m a kid?! Do you even remember how old I am?! Stay out of my life! I can live without you! I don’t need you, go live your own damn life for once!” North shouts, shoving him in the chest.

Norawit blinks slowly and steps back.

That hurt.

Even knowing North doesn’t truly mean it, the words still stab deep. All these years, Norawit’s protected him, saved him, fought for him. And instead of gratitude, he gets slapped in the face with this. He never asks for much, but basic respect and appreciation should be automatic. Especially when someone twists themselves inside out for you.

They’re all they have.

But apparently, North doesn’t see it that way.

Norawit scoffs bitterly, shakes his head, and turns away.

He has nothing left to say.

“Norawit…” his brother sighs heavily behind him. “I didn’t mean it like that—”

“You know what,” Norawit says, turning back. “Do whatever you want. Get into trouble. Drown in debt. Do drugs. Drink yourself stupid. Ruin your life. Sink deeper and deeper. I won’t lift a finger for you anymore. Handle it yourself, since you don’t need me. I know why you do this. You’re hurting. You’re broken. You don’t know how to live with what happened to us. But don’t forget, it’s not just you. It’s both of us. I’m drowning too. And it hurts like

hell when the only person who matters tells me to fuck off. Do you even know how lonely I feel? I'm dying of loneliness even though I have you. I don't feel like I have family. Did you ever think about that? Even once? When you call me with your problems instead of asking how I am? You never ask. You never call just to talk. I always wondered why. What did I do wrong? Am I a bad brother? No. You just don't care."

"Norawit, that's not true, I—"

Norawit flips him off and walks away.

He hears a heavy sigh behind him, hears his name again, but he doesn't stop. He strides toward his motorcycle, fast and angry.

To hell with all of it.

He has no desire to dig into this mess any deeper tonight.

He decides, as usual, to drown his problems in alcohol. It's the only way he knows to completely forget everything exploding inside him, everything ready to spill over. He's been numbing himself like this for years now. He knows it isn't the healthiest choice and that sooner or later it could end badly, but he doesn't know any other way to cope. If he were the kind of person who could open up easily, he might have talked it out with someone. Instead, he only screams at the waves once in a while, when the pressure inside his chest becomes unbearable.

There's no one in his life close enough for him to call at any hour of the day or night just to say how shitty everything feels.

He wanders through the supermarket aisles, picking out items without any real enthusiasm. He has absolutely no appetite, even though he skipped breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The apathy weighing on him is so heavy that the only thing he wants is to get drunk and go to sleep. He moves quickly through the store, grabbing only what's necessary. He doesn't need much: alcohol for himself and milk for Jumu. Then he heads to the checkout.

The cashier, a young guy in a baseball cap, gives him a long, scrutinizing look while scanning the items. There's something suspicious about it, and it instantly irritates him. People look at him like that all the time, as if he's some kind of criminal. Norawit is used to it by now. His appearance tends to give off that impression.

“What?” Titicharoenrak snaps, arching an eyebrow and nodding toward the camera. “I didn’t steal anything. Why are you staring? You wanna check?”

“Oh, no, sorry.”

“Then back off and stop gawking before I punch you.”

“I just thought… you came here on a motorcycle, right? Judging by your clothes.”

“Let’s say I did. So what?”

“Then it looks like that’s your bike someone’s trying to strip,” the guy says, pointing at the security monitor.

Titicharoenrak looks at the smudged, grayish screen and sees a dark figure crouched beside his motorcycle, barely visible in the shadows. The thief has a small flashlight clenched between his teeth and is clearly trying to unscrew the headlight with something that looks like a screwdriver, nervously glancing around.

“Shit!” Norawit yells and bolts, abandoning his purchases at the register.

He sprints outside, cuts across the parking lot behind the supermarket, and heads straight for his bike. The thief immediately takes off, realizing he’s been caught. The guy races toward a car parked in the darkness and almost manages to get away.

“Oh no you don’t, you little bastard! You picked the wrong guy!” Titicharoenrak shouts, speeding up as he chases him.

He vaults over the hood of the car, sliding across it on his thigh, and throws himself into the passenger seat just as the driver starts the engine. Norawit grabs the black bandana off the thief’s head, listening to a stream of colorful swearing, and raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Norawit says, recognizing the face. “Wait a second. What is this? Club owners not making enough money these days?”

“You’ve got the wrong guy, asshole! Get out of my car!” the driver snaps aggressively.

“Seriously? You were just trying to dismantle my bike!” Norawit fires back, frowning. “And you’ve got the nerve to kick me out? You’re bold, I’ll give you that.”

“I didn’t dismantle anything. Now get lost. I’ve got places to be.”

“Yeah? Robbing other innocent people, Clyde Chestnut?”

“That’s none of your business. Get out already.”

“Oh no,” Titicharoenrak smirks. “You’re going to explain.”

“What?” the driver raises an eyebrow, looking at him.

Norawit studies him more closely and realizes he's already seen these clothes today. The same plaid shirt, only now with a leather jacket over it and the same bandana. He glances at the hood of the car and recognizes the familiar design.

Holy shit. That's the Mustang.

He looks back at the guy and scans his face again. The resemblance is uncanny. He looks almost exactly like the owner of Invictus. The only differences are a shaved eyebrow,an ear piercing, and a pretty mole on his nose.

"Unbelievable. You really are twins," Norawit mutters, shaking his head with a quiet laugh. "That explains why he asked about my brother and let me go so easily. Looks like he's got the same problem, a troublesome sibling."

"I'm actually the older one," the guy snaps. "And that's none of your concern. Get out of my car, idiot."

Titicharoenrak dodges his shove easily and twists his wrist, pinning one arm behind his back. The guy groans in pain and bends forward awkwardly, ending up far too close to Norawit's crotch.

"Oh, we're not that close yet, baby," Norawit says lazily, running a hand through his hair. "At least wait until the second date."

"Fuck off!" Jirochtikul snarls, jerking upward and accidentally smashing the back of his head into Norawit's nose.

"Motherfucker! Are you insane?!" Norawit yells, clutching his nose and tilting his head back. "What the hell was that? I was joking! That hurts, you moron!"

"Shit, sorry. I'm sorry," the guy blurts out, then bursts into laughter.

"You're laughing?" Titicharoenrak groans.

"Sorry," Nattawat keeps laughing. "I really didn't mean to."

His eyes wrinkles adorably as he laughs, and it's stupidly charming. If they'd known each other better, Norawit might've forgiven him anything just for that. Nattawat bites his lip, trying to hold it in, and watches him with a guilty look. After a few seconds of observing Norawit check if his nose is still intact, he catches the angry glare aimed his way.

"You're lucky you didn't break anything," Norawit growls, narrowing his dark eyes.

"What, you gonna file a police report?" Nattawat laughs again.

"You're brave because your brother's rich, huh? Think he'll bail you out?"

"My brother stays out of my life," Nattawat frowns.

"So you really are his twin?"

“And if I am?” Nattawat arches an eyebrow arrogantly.

“It’s impressive. One of you owns an elite club, and the other robs people and races illegally.”

“We’re pretty different, even if we’re identical. Sounds stupid, but—”

“I get it. I’ve got a younger brother. An idiot like you,” Norawit says.

“How do you even know Night?”

“Through my brother. Now I owe him because of North.”

“Wait, your brother trashed his bar?” Nattawat asks, then laughs loudly again. “Oh my God, that’s amazing. I’d love to meet him. He said it was spectacular.”

“He was drunk,” Norawit replies dryly. “But it’s sweet that he shares things like that with you.”

“Yeah. He also told me you offered to blow him.”

“Yep. And he missed out on a truly luxurious gift,” Norawit smirks. “But we’re not talking about me. What did you do to my bike?”

“Nothing. Didn’t get the chance,” Nattawat says, raising his hands in mock surrender.

“I swear, if there’s even a scratch on it, I’ll kill you,” Titicharoenrak warns, pointing a finger inches from his face.

He steps out to inspect the motorcycle. The headlight’s intact, and there doesn’t seem to be any damage, though it’s hard to see in the dark. At first glance, it looks fine. Norawit exhales heavily and runs a fond hand over the bike, like it’s alive and understands him.

Did this idiot really try to strip it? With a car like that, does he seriously need money? And doesn’t he have another sports car too? What the hell is wrong with him?

“I told you, I didn’t manage to do anything,” Nattawat says, leaning against his car and lighting a cigarette.

“You’re lucky,” Titicharoenrak mutters as he climbs onto the bike.

The owner of the Mustang watches him intently, smiling mysteriously. Norawit can feel those eyes on his skin, practically burning a hole through him. It’s obvious the guy is openly checking him out. Nothing new, Norawit’s used to it.

“What?” Titicharoenrak asks, raising an eyebrow.

“What?” Nattawat exhales smoke toward the sky.

“Interested?” Norawit asks.

“In you?”

“Do you see anyone else here?”

“Pretty face.”

“That’s it?” Norawit grins, tossing his brown hair back. “Don’t be shy. It’s gorgeous. Look closer.”

“You definitely won’t die of modesty,” Nattawat laughs.

“Modesty?” Titicharoenrak looks genuinely confused. “Sounds familiar, but I can’t remember what it means.”

“You’re terrible,” Nattawat wrinkles his nose cutely. “You look so charming, but inside it’s pure chaos.”

“Wanna dance with my demons?”

“Don’t flirt with me.”

“Then stop staring.”

“Fine. One-one,” Nattawat shrugs.

“But honestly, I don’t mind,” Norawit says, trying to start the bike. It hums softly, but the engine doesn’t catch. “What the hell?” he mutters.

“Trouble there, sexy?” Nattawat smirks.

“Fuck! Did you drain my gas?!” Titicharoenrak yells, staring at the gauge. “What the hell? I just filled it!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Nattawat laughs.

“Natt, that’s crossing a line!”

“Oh, so you know my name? Funny, I don’t know yours. Wanna fix that?”

Norawit squints and slowly approaches him, a sly smile on his lips. He bites the inside of his cheek, considering his options, openly scanning him from head to toe. This twin is more his type than the one at the club. They’re similar, but completely different. No arrogance in his eyes. He’s grounded, real. Mischief dances in his dark pupils, and his lips curve into a soft, boyish smile.

So this is the racer terrorizing everyone on the Loop. Cocky, reckless, hot, and smiling like an adorable kid. It’s ridiculous.

“So, what’s your name?” Nattawat asks, lifting his chin defiantly and raising his cigarette.

“Didn’t your brother tell you?” Norawit smirks, plucking the cigarette from his fingers.

He holds it delicately between his fingers, maintaining eye contact as he takes a deep drag and holds it in his lungs.

“If I’d known someone this gorgeous owed him a favor, I’d definitely have asked your name,” Nattawat says playfully.

“And you just told me not to flirt with you,” Norawit arches an eyebrow, stepping closer and blowing smoke into his face.

For a moment, silence stretches between them as they shamelessly stare at each other. The tension is thick, buzzing with pleasant electricity. That kind of spark that flares between strangers when desire ignites instantly.

“Does it smell like sexual chemistry to you too?” Nattawat asks.

“I think your sense of smell’s off, pretty boy.”

Nattawat laughs loudly.

“I don’t sleep with guys like you,” Norawit says, flicking the cigarette away. “So cool it.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Nattawat asks, surprised.

“Hot, sexy, bold, but a criminal. Guys like you end up behind bars sooner or later. Why would I get attached to someone I’ll lose? I’ve got enough problems already.”

“Then don’t get attached. Just have fun. They say it helps avoid heartbreak.”

“Careful, baby,” Norawit smiles. “I might actually agree to that adventure.”

Nattawat smirks, eyebrow arching provocatively.

“You tried to strip my bike and drained the tank. What should I do with you? Naughty behavior.”

“Oh no, what a nightmare,” Nattawat laughs theatrically. “Bad behavior usually gets punished.”

“Looks like it will,” Norawit says, stepping close and slipping his hand into Nattawat’s jacket pocket to steal the car keys.

He leans in, distracting him, and Nattawat inhales sharply when the scent of watermelon hits his senses; sweet, fresh, soft, completely at odds with the image of a reckless biker.

“You tried to charm me with that cute smile and seduce me into dirty sex ten minutes after meeting,” Norawit murmurs. “But you also interrupted some important business. So go back into the supermarket and pay for my groceries. Then I’ll forgive your little prank.”

He steps back.

The words hit like a slap. Nattawat blinks rapidly.

“Why would you think I—”

“Oh?” Norawit jingles the keys in front of his face.

Nattawat snorts, patting his pockets. “You got me. Son of a bitch.”

“Two-one,” Norawit winks, sliding into the driver’s seat like it’s his car. “Go on. I’ll wait. You’ll get it back after.”

Nattawat hesitates. He could punch him, grab the keys, and leave. But he was caught red-handed, and the truth is… this arrogant bastard is insanely attractive. Maybe he’s worth it.

After a few seconds, Nattawat goes to pay. Norawit watches him walk away, smiling triumphantly as his gaze lingers on Nattawat’s perfect ass in tight jeans.

While waiting, Norawit sends Phuwin a quick message with the bike’s location so he can pick it up. Tonight, Norawit plans to get home in a very different way, and with interesting company.

A few minutes later, Nattawat returns carrying beer and milk.

“Seriously? What kind of combo is this?” he asks.

“Beer for me. Milk for the kid,” Norawit shrugs.

“You have a kid?” Nattawat blinks.

“Yeah. A son.”

“What’s his name?”

“Lord Jumu.”

“What?” Nattawat bursts out laughing. “What kind of name is that? You clearly don’t like him.”

“Natt? What kind of name is that? Didn’t your parents love you?” Norawit shoots back, starting the car. “Get in, idiot. You’re driving me tonight.”

“Then I should be driving, not you.”

“Blah blah blah,” Norawit rolls his eyes, revving the engine. “Get in or I’m taking off.”

Nattawat smirks, sets the groceries down, and gets into the passenger seat. He watches Norawit’s profile as he buckles up, realizing he’s somehow letting a total stranger drive his car.

What the hell is he doing?

“My name’s Nattawat. Natt is just a nickname,” he says, looking out the window.

“And I’m Norawit. Among friends, they call me Gem,” Norawit replies, turning up the music.

“I like Sexy better,” Nattawat says smugly.

Norawit laughs brightly and pulls onto the road, heading toward home.

A week later…

Titicharoenrak wipes the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of a plaid shirt thrown over a white tank top and turns up the volume on the old radio. Through the wall from the neighboring room of the workshop come the shrill whine of a grinder and the loud laughter of the mechanics tuning up some flashy car. They’re joking about something only they understand, practically shouting over the music. Usually the guys leave earlier than him, but today they’ve stayed almost until midnight because of some urgent order.

The auto shop has long since become his second home. He spends most of his time here, trying to earn a living. The boss is an old friend from his school days, someone who can easily pay his wages early if needed, or even let him work on credit without asking questions. He knows Norawit does this to pay off his brother’s debts as quickly as possible, so he treats his requests with understanding. Norawit often takes on extra work to earn more, and he’s got skillful hands, so the shop profits from it and gains a good reputation.

Titicharoenrak smokes quickly, studying the client’s car, battered by time, and then gets back to work. His back aches from staying in one position for too long, his neck constantly going stiff, forcing him to stretch it again and again. Muscle spasms have been tormenting him for several years now, but he’s learned to live with it. Sweat trickles down his temple, and he wipes his face with his sleeve again. He’s been bent under the hood for hours, trying to fix an old yellow pickup truck.

There’s something satisfying about bringing things back to life. You work long and painstakingly, and then suddenly the thing starts functioning again, making its owner happy. Isn’t that amazing?

He reaches for a tool when he suddenly hears the calm crunch of tires rolling over gravel toward the wide, open garage door. He recognizes the sound instantly, the roar of a V12 twin-turbo engine and the insane seven hundred twenty-five horsepower under the hood. He’s seen cars like that on the Loop. The engine is a beast, paired with an eight-speed transmission.

Incredible performance. And yet cars like this don't usually come here. There are hardly any luxury vehicles like that in Sotel at all. Most people here are middle or lower income.

Interesting.

He looks up and sees a black Aston Martin. The kind of car that surely draws admiring stares when it glides through the sunny streets of California, with its distinctive hood and aggressive bumper. The massive gaping grille, the large side air intakes, the narrow LED lights all make your jaw drop. A beautiful little beast, and the matte finish only adds elegance and class. He was right, elite sports cars like this have never been here in his memory.

The driver's door opens slowly, and a pair of men's boots touch the ground. Something tightens in Titicharoenrak's chest, an irrational flicker of fear. Who would come here in a car like that, and why? Obviously, the owner of the Aston is here for him. There's no one else. But the tension eases the moment he sees the driver's face.

The same guy from the club. Only dressed much more simply today. A regular jacket and jeans. His hair isn't slicked back like last time, instead falling in soft, messy strands, earrings glinting in his ears. The expression, though, is just as bold and arrogant. A rich asshole walks straight toward him, looking around with open curiosity.

The guest comes closer, hands tucked into his jacket pockets, first giving Norawit a long, assessing look, then scanning the entire space. As if judging how safe it is for him to be here. It's obvious places like this aren't familiar territory for him, but there's interest in his dark eyes, not disgust. Which means he's not completely awful, and not the type to wrinkle his nose at dirty work the way people of his status usually do.

"Norawit Titicharoenrak," Night says, slowly lifting his gaze to him and smiling pleasantly.

"That's me," Norawit replies, arching an eyebrow smugly.

"Well, I'll be damned. You didn't lie. You could have, and I'd be hunting you down all over the city."

"I don't run from problems. I prefer solving them."

Jirochtikul lifts his brows in surprise and hums approvingly.

"Words of a strong man," he says, respect coloring his voice.

"Yeah, I'm pretty great," Titicharoenrak shrugs.

Night laughs softly at the confidence and strolls around the space, turning his head as he looks around. He's genuinely interested. It reminds him of his childhood friend's garage, modest, stuck somewhere in the eighties or nineties. Cozy in its own way. Spare parts and metal everywhere. Wooden crates, tires, a small fridge that probably holds beer, a worn sofa with food stains, an old radio crackling with music, retro movie posters on the walls. All that's missing is a TV and a game console to complete the picture of a proper man cave where he once spent so much of his youth.

It smells faintly of alcohol, pizza, and motor oil. In the corner stands Norawit's motorcycle, with a familiar leather jacket draped over it, decorated with colorful rhinestone designs on the shoulders.

It's funny how a person can combine two completely different sides. Blatant roughness and hidden softness. He's a cocky rebel with a charming smile. His facial features are delicate, sensual, almost aristocratic. Fragile in a way, gentle, carrying a special kind of charm, and his light brown hair only adds playfulness and ease to the image. And alongside all of that lives his other side, a love for leather, motorcycles, and bad habits. Norawit is insolent, aggressive, rude, spoiled rotten, vulgar, uninhibited, and poorly mannered.

Night has heard things about him, about his life, and many of the descriptions from his friends genuinely surprised him. How can all of that exist in one person and coexist peacefully? Astonishing.

"I heard you met my brother," Jirochtikul says, examining the gleaming motorcycle.

"Yeah. Turns out he's a real son of a bitch," Titicharoenrak smirks. "Won't leave me alone on the Loop. Comes to watch my races like a lovesick schoolgirl."

"He likes you," Night smiles, turning to him. "A son of a bitch, sure. But I could say the same about your twin."

"Must be a family flaw. Though yours tried to rob me right under my nose."

"Nattawat," Night chuckles, shaking his head, "has a taste for risk. I try to rein in his recklessness, but sometimes I'm powerless. He doesn't listen to me very often."

"Why'd he do it? He's from a good, wealthy family."

"And why did North trash my bar?" Jirochtikul arches a brow and shrugs. "I think they both have their reasons for acting like children. And we're left to clean up after them. Though my older brother doesn't even come close to your younger one. Yours has no brakes at all, does he?"

"It's complicated. I'm trying to handle it. He really is difficult, sometimes completely impossible. You've seen what he's capable of. So did you come here on business, or did you just have no one else to talk to about personal stuff?" Titicharoenrak asks, steering the conversation away.

Night adjusts the collar of his leather jacket and studies him with a knowing squint. He realizes he could easily forgive the mess in front of the club. For him, it's not a significant amount of money. But Norawit seems like the kind of man who doesn't want to live in perpetual debt. Which means a handout would only make him feel worse. He'd hate himself if someone gave him something for nothing. Clearly, he's used to earning everything through blood, sweat, and tears. And covering for his younger brother's screw-ups is just part of his daily life.

“I calculated the damage North caused. Ten thousand, just as I thought,” Jirochtikul says, running a hand over the motorcycle with a faint smile.

“Great night out, you idiot,” Titicharoenrak mutters with a heavy sigh. “Sorry. I’ll pay it back.”

“I remember you don’t have the money. But I offered you work, and that offer still stands. I gave it some thought and decided I can let you work behind the bar at the club until you make it back in tips. As far as I know, you have experience.”

“Yeah, I used to bartend, but that could take a while.”

“Are you in a hurry?” Night smirks.

“No, it’s just…” Norawit trails off, rubbing his brow. “Never mind. I agree. It’s better than trying to scrape together the cash.”

“You do understand that my clientele consists of wealthy, respectable people. They’re used to very attentive service. If you do well, you can make that amount in just a couple of shifts. Maybe even one. It depends on how they look at you and how you behave.”

“That works for me.”

“Excellent. Then I’ll expect you at the club soon. I’ll inform security and the staff. You’ll have a partner,” he says and heads for the exit, glancing around.

Titicharoenrak watches him go, then follows the blinking headlights of the sports car as it unlocks with a button press. Night walks up to it, opens the driver’s door, then suddenly stops before getting in. He looks at Norawit with something understanding in his eyes, thinking about something personal, and exhales deeply.

“Listen, this has nothing to do with our problems, but if you ever need help with your brother, his addiction and all that, you can ask me. I’ll help. No strings attached,” Jirochtikul says suddenly.

“Why do you want to help me?” Norawit asks, surprised.

“Not you. Him. He’s young, handsome, and I don’t think he’s stupid. But if he doesn’t quit drinking now, he’ll end up in things much worse than this. Just keep it in mind. I can help.”

Already has, Norawit thinks to himself, sighing quietly. He doesn’t answer, only nods shortly to show he heard. Jirochtikul smiles at him from the corner of his mouth and gets into the car.

“Night,” Titicharoenrak calls, and he lifts a brow in surprise. “Since I’ll be working at the club, can I bring friends? At least once.”

“The same kind of lunatics?” he laughs.

“Obviously.”

“Go ahead,” he says after a few seconds of thought. “But if anything happens, this time you’ll be paying for their sins with a first-class blowjob. I won’t be that generous with you again.”

A couple of days later, having settled things at the workshop, Titicharoenrak was heading to his new, temporary job after his shift. A couple of nights behind the bar, or at best just one, and everything would be resolved. Honestly, this was the best possible outcome, one he hadn’t even dared to hope for. He’d expected things with this club to be much more complicated. But surprisingly, Night turned out to be a pretty decent guy. Or maybe it was simply luck that he himself had a problematic twin brother. That, in some way, made him more understanding, and Jirochtikul had allowed Titicharoenrak to get off the hook easily.

He was right about one thing: the crowd here consisted exclusively of wealthy people, so earning ten grand wouldn’t be that hard. Back at the bar where Norawit had worked a few years ago, he’d had to scrape together loose change in tips. Here, everything was supposed to be much easier. The main thing was not to cause trouble or get into fights. If he behaved himself, he’d be done with this problem in just a couple of shifts.

Phuwin was waiting in his car outside the building. He’d dressed up too for tonight, since everyone inside the club always looked polished. Why should they be any different? Tonight, he and Pahn were going to party among rich assholes, so they needed to match the vibe.

“Holy shit. Do you actually own pants? And a shirt?” Titicharoenrak laughed, teasing him and straightening his collar.

“Yeah, imagine that. They’d been hanging in my mom’s closet for ten years. Left over from my dad.”

“Should’ve stayed there until someone in the family died,” Norawit said, appraising him. “I wouldn’t even wear that to a funeral.”

“Don’t listen to him. You look amazing. If you weren’t my friend, I’d totally sleep with you after a few drinks,” Pahn said, fixing her hair.

“I can stop being your friend for tonight,” Tangsakyuen laughed, wiggling his eyebrows at her in the rearview mirror.

“No,” she grimaced. “That only worked with older Titicharoenrak, and I was way too drunk.”

“You look like some nerd from my school,” Norawit said, studying him.

“And you look like milk chocolate,” Phu laughed, nodding at his hair. “I like it. Haven’t seen this color in a while.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, you fuck off.”

“You should’ve worn a tie while you were at it. This is awful. You don’t even look like yourself.”

“Just let me feel like one of those people in the club for one night,” Phu said, starting the car.

“Buddy, to feel like them, you need a black American Express or a rich daddy. Or a sugar mama,” Titicharoenrak laughed.

“Hm,” Tangsakyuen shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind that arrangement.”

“Even if she’s way over forty?”

“How far over?” he asked seriously.

“You’re disgusting. Don’t even think about it.”

“Isn’t love ageless?”

“Yes. But not when you’re twenty-two and she’s older than your mother.”

“Okay, okay, I’m kidding,” Phu said, pressing the gas. “Though…”

“Oh my God, you’re both awful,” Pahn sighed.

“Better shut up, Phu, or we’ll believe you’re actually capable of it,” Titicharoenrak said, shoving his shoulder.

They reached the club quickly because Tangsakyuen cheated and broke traffic rules, even playing lane-weaving a couple of times, earning plenty of angry honks and probably a few speeding tickets. Phuwin parked in the staff lot and turned off the engine. He helped Pahn out of the car, and she slipped her arm through his. Norawit had been given brief instructions on where to go, so the three of them passed security without any trouble through the back entrance. He led them down a long corridor toward the door into the main hall. The muted bass of rhythmic music grew louder, and the air smelled sterile, like the place had been disinfected recently.

“Holy shit, it’s that easy to get in when you have connections,” Phuwin said, rolling his shoulders to the beat.

“How did you get in last time?” Titicharoenrak asked, turning around.

“North got us in. He talked to some acquaintance,” Pahn said.

“An acquaintance from here? Interesting,” Norawit muttered, opening the door for them.

The music hit harder immediately. He glanced into the hall, quickly scanning the room. Fewer people than last time, mostly women. Only about a dozen guys lounged in the VIP area. Pretty calm, though it was still early.

“Alright, get lost. Behave yourselves, kids,” Norawit said, clapping Phu on the shoulder. “I need to find my partner and start working.”

Tangsakyuen brushed a hand over his neck and winked, then took Pahn’s hand, disappearing behind the heavy door. Titicharoenrak headed back down the corridor, searching for the staff room. He found only the locker room, but whoever he was looking for might be there.

“Hey, you Titicharoenrak?” a low voice asked from behind.

“Yeah. And you are?”

“San,” the guy said, tossing him a uniform. “Boss told me you’re working with me tonight. Need an explanation?”

“No. I’ve worked behind a bar.”

“Perfect. Then change, and I’ll be waiting.”

The dark-haired guy with tattooed forearms rolled down his sleeves and headed into the hall. Norawit eyed the uniform suspiciously, frowning. A white shirt, slacks, and a bow tie? Night seriously expected him to wear this? Funny joke. He ran a hand through his hair, shoved the uniform into a locker with someone else’s name on it, and went to work.

At the bar, he immediately noticed that the glass shelves and bottles had been replaced, no trace of the destruction from a week ago. More people were arriving.

He spotted Phuwin dancing on the floor, surrounded by girls, already drinking from a small glass. Unbearable. Five minutes in and he’d already found company. Always did. Even among people from a completely different world. Probably told them he was the son of some oil tycoon. Very on brand. And tomorrow morning, while one of those girls woke up naked with a brutal hangover, he’d be home having breakfast. One-night stand, no obligations. Perfect when you don’t want feelings.

San shot him an annoyed look while wiping glasses. Norawit knew exactly why, but there was no way he was putting on that clown outfit. He poured himself some gin and knocked it back to get into the work mindset. San chuckled and did the same, glancing cautiously at the balcony.

“Scared daddy’ll notice?” Titicharoenrak asked.

“He’s there, but busy. Guests. He’ll start watching in about an hour,” San said, taking orders.

“He always hangs around?”

“Mostly. This club is his baby. He’s afraid it’ll fail.”

“I thought guys like him didn’t worry about that with that kind of money.”

“It’s complicated. His father gave him Invictus when he turned eighteen and said if he fucked it up, he’d be left with nothing. Cut him off completely. Funny how a kid with no experience was supposed to revive a near-dead business. But he did it. Somehow. This place is one of the best in the city now. He beat his father at his own game. Basically, the rich bastard kicked him out with a ‘generous gift.’ If the club starts dying, Night loses everything.”

Norawit raised his brows and glanced toward the VIP balcony. Pretty brutal, putting that kind of ultimatum on your kid. Guess paradise had problems too.

“I thought he was just another rich daddy’s boy.”

“Technically, yeah. But that rich daddy’s a real bastard. Doesn’t care much about his son.”

“Son? I thought he had two,” Norawit said.

“He considers the second one trash. They grew up in different families. The other had it rough.”

“Oh,” Titicharoenrak muttered.

“Every family has skeletons,” San sighed. “Now let’s work. More tips for you. Start earlier, leave sooner.”

Hours flew by. The crowd grew, orders piled up, and Norawit handled it effortlessly. Old experience kicked in. Between rushes, Phu or Pahn would come by, and they’d drink together. A pleasant buzz settled in, light and warm, though his mind stayed sharp. It’d take much more to knock him out.

Counting tips in his head, moving to the beat, he realized he was still short by over half. Not bad, but the peak would end soon. He needed a plan. No way he wanted more shifts. He was exhausted, and he still had to be at the workshop at eight in the morning.

He looked up at the VIP balcony where Night stood, relaxed now, watching the club. An idea formed. Jirochtikul lifted his glass of Chivas like a greeting and smiled. Norawit saluted back, handing a drink to a pretty girl wearing a plastic crown.

“Thanks, handsome,” she giggled drunkenly.

“Celebrating something?” he asked, nodding at her friends. “Birthday?”

“Bachelorette party,” she sighed. “I’m getting married this weekend.”

She showed him a ring with a massive diamond. Judging by the size, her fiancé was probably some Arab sheikh.

“Congrats,” Titicharoenrak smirked. “I don’t really believe in eternal love, but people still try.”

“Hard not to rethink it when guys like you work here,” she laughed, eyeing him. “Where were you before? My girls all like you.”

“Really?” he asked smugly.

“Care to join us? I’ll talk to your boss. We know each other well.”

Tempting. Very tempting. And then the perfect plan clicked.

“What are you drinking?” he asked.

“Tequila.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Why?”

“Owner’s got a special gift for you tonight. It’s your bachelorette. You should celebrate properly.”

“Will you drink with me?”

“Better,” Norawit winked.

He looks around, then lifts his gaze to the small balcony and catches Night watching him with interest, observing everything happening below like a proper owner of the place. What Titicharoenrak is about to do definitely doesn’t fit the concept of the club, but who cares? He needs to make money, and everyone hustles however they can. Jirochtikul seems to sense that his temporary employee is up to something and raises an eyebrow suspiciously.

Norawit walks around the bar counter and deftly jumps up onto it. He straightens to his full height, looking down at the crowd, and at that exact moment the music changes and the lights dim. The clubgoers stare at him in surprise, unsure of what’s happening, while he slowly tilts his head from side to side, listening to the beat before he starts to move. Security immediately tenses, exchanging glances, not knowing how to react.

“What the hell is he doing?” Night says, smiling.

“Should we stop him?” one of the guards asks.

“No. Let him have his fun. Let’s see how far he goes.”

“What’s going on over there?” Nattawat asks, rising from the couch.

“Oh, you’re going to like this, brother,” Night laughs.

Norawit moves his arms smoothly, letting his hands glide over his body as he slowly steps toward the center of the bar. One girl immediately realizes what he's about to do and lets out a delighted squeal, clapping her hands and nodding to the rhythm. Her friends quickly join in, cheering and moving closer. Once he fully catches the beat, he starts swaying rhythmically from side to side. His palms slide over his chest and stomach, and then he rolls his body in slow, seductive waves.

The alcohol he drank with Phu and Pahn helps him completely relax and not only gain something from the situation, but actually enjoy it. He plants his feet shoulder-width apart and starts rolling his hips to the sensual music, his hands resting on his belt. The girls are absolutely thrilled by every move he makes, and their reaction brings a smug smile to his lips. Slowly, he drags his hands down his strong thighs, then slides one palm upward and hooks his fingers under the hem of his T-shirt, lifting it to reveal his abs while continuing to dance with deliberate sensuality.

Norawit feels like his skin is burning from everything happening around him. He shrugs his jacket off his shoulders and tosses it to San, who's standing there with his mouth slightly open in shock. His body temperature spikes, and it becomes unbearably hot. Maybe it's the dance. Or maybe it's the fact that someone has been watching him far too intently this entire time.

He flicks a glance toward Night and notices Pahn and Nattawat beside him, Nattawat who is practically devouring him with his eyes. There's a wild fire burning in those dark depths, like he's never seen anything this indecent in his life. His greedy gaze drags over Norawit's legs wrapped in those damn leather pants, clinging like a second skin, then up to the white T-shirt and the sweat-dampened neck. His eyes dart from one part of Norawit's body to another, unable to decide what he likes more, his long legs, his perfect ass, his full lips, or what he's teasing beneath that shirt. Fuck, he's so captivating it's impossible to look away.

Titicharoenrak runs his fingers through his light brown hair and throws his head back in a sharp motion. Slowly, he drops to his knees and rolls his hips with unmistakable sexual intent. He can't stop the satisfied grin when he notices Nattawat swallow hard, watching him. The racer gets worked up as fast as his Mustang, his breathing already unsteady. Norawit doesn't slow down. Just as smoothly, he rises to his feet, runs his hands over his body, then lifts them above his head. He dances so beautifully it sends a pleasant shiver through most of the crowd. Every movement is fluid and erotic, never awkward or forced. He knows exactly what his body is— a weapon. And right now, he's using it, fueled by his reckless, intoxicating energy.

"Damn," Night chuckles quietly, watching the way the guy drags a hand along his neck, sticks out his tongue, and slowly traces his lips with it, eyes half-lidded. "He's hot."

"Shut up. Don't even think about it," Nattawat says with a crooked grin.

Norawit grabs a bottle fitted with a pour spout and spreads his legs wide as he sinks into a deep squat right in front of that same girl wearing a crown. He flashes her a seductive smile, gently takes her by the chin, and pulls her closer. Lifting the tequila above her head, he

watches as she opens her mouth wide. The alcohol streams down in a thin line, and Titicharoenrak keeps everything perfectly controlled so she doesn't choke, his palm firmly holding her face. She never breaks eye contact, her gaze burning as she enjoys this game drenched in raw sexual tension.

He pulls the bottle away and picks up a slice of lime—but instead of giving it to her, he holds it between his own lips. With a playful curl of his finger, he beckons her closer and sits down on the bar, letting his legs dangle. The sheikh's bride leans in and takes the lime from his mouth, and then he grips her by the neck and kisses her quickly. Her friends scream in delight. She blinks dazedly for a few seconds before he abruptly pulls back, smiling smugly.

"Let me be the last guy you kissed before married life," he says, winking.

"I already regret getting married," she laughs.

"Don't. It never would've worked between us anyway."

Titicharoenrak hops back behind the bar and runs his fingers through his damp hair, pushing it away from his face. He's insanely hot now, his T-shirt sticking to his skin. He tries to steady his breathing and looks at Nattawat, who seems torn between wanting to destroy him or devour him whole. Nattawat bites his lip, gripping the wrought-iron railing tightly, his wild eyes locked on Norawit. Interesting. Looks like someone's struggling with possessiveness, even though nothing connects them except obvious, undeniable chemistry.

Pahn laughs along with Night at his friend's stunt, and the club owner gives Norawit a thumbs-up before clapping his jealous brother on the shoulder. Good. At least he's not mad about pulling something like this in his elite club.

A few minutes later, the bride returns to the bar. She smiles drunkenly and asks for another shot. Norawit pours it, and she downs it in one go, grimacing slightly before setting her plastic card on the counter and tapping it with a red-polished nail.

"Leaving already? Want the check?" he asks.

"No. That's for the show. There should be enough. There's ten thousand on it. You earned it, handsome," she says, winking before adjusting her crown and walking away.

Norawit watches her go with a smile, triumph blooming in his chest. The plan worked perfectly. He can pay off his debt to Night and still keep some of the money for himself. He had fun and made a profit, couldn't be better. Now he can relax and finish the rest of his shift without pushing himself too hard.

Phuwin drops onto a stool at the bar, raising his brows in disbelief. He drums his palms against the dark surface, excitement clear on his face, a satisfied grin refusing to fade.

“What the hell was that?” he laughs, staring at his friend in genuine disbelief. “That was a whole damn show. I almost died laughing. Did you see their faces? Rich kids have absolutely no idea how to let loose. Your filthy little dance was the climax of the night.”

“Oh, come on,” Norawit replies, pouring him another drink. “They just weren’t expecting something like that. It’s not exactly the Invictus style. I just shamelessly used my talents to make some money.”

“You should’ve started stripping. Every girl in the place would’ve been yours.”

“That’s too much. Don’t drag me into the ranks of strippers.”

“Please. You caused more chaos fully clothed than any of them could dream of. Even I got a little hard watching you,” Tangsakyuen says, downing his drink in one go.

“Oh my God, shut up, you pervert,” Titicharoenrak laughs, drinking as well. “Keep your dick far away from my ass.”

“No, seriously. That was hot. You staged some kind of sexual revolution.”

“The important thing is I made the amount I needed,” Titicharoenrak says, twirling the card in front of his face.

“Seriously? All of it?”

“Yeah. So I don’t owe anything anymore.”

“And Night approved of that performance? What if you ruined the club’s reputation?”

“He loved it,” Norawit laughs.

“Technically that kind of thing isn’t allowed here, but the ladies are obsessed with you,” Phuwin says, glancing around.

“And not just them,” Titicharoenrak smirks, drinking again and looking up toward the balcony.

Tangsakyuen notices and follows his gaze. Pahn is standing there with a group of guys, and among them he immediately recognizes Nattawat. Tangsakyuen lifts a hand in greeting, then ten seconds later turns back with his mouth hanging open.

He blinks rapidly, piecing everything together, then points at his friend and shakes his head in shock.

“Wait, wait. You and him…?”

“No.”

“But he’s staring at you like it’s a yes.”

“Yeah,” Titicharoenrak says smugly.

“Holy shit. Are you having an affair with the Dragon? And you didn’t tell me? Not even your best friend?” Phuwin leans forward, eyes wide. “What the actual fuck.”

“There’s no affair,” Titicharoenrak protests. “But judging by how he reacted tonight, he definitely wouldn’t mind. He’s into me.”

“You said you didn’t even know him. Why the hell didn’t I know you two met?”

“After that race on the Loop, we ran into each other at a supermarket and talked. It was funny,” Titicharoenrak laughs, pouring them another round.

“I demand dirty details.”

“There aren’t any. He was trying to take apart my bike, I caught him in the act, and then I gave him a ride in his car.”

“You’re insane. And you kept this quiet? I should be the first to know when my best friend is fucking Natt.”

“I’m not fucking him.”

“Give it time. The way you two are burning everything alive with those looks… damn. That’s one hot duo,” Phuwin says, wiggling his eyebrows.

“You’re acting like I told you I’m marrying him.”

“He’s a dragon. A legend in my circle. And he’s hot as hell. I’m not surprised you ran into each other and sparks flew instantly. I’m just shocked I didn’t introduce you sooner.”

“Calm down. There’s nothing between us, and you’ve already invented a whole story.”

“Sure. Nothing except insane chemistry,” Tangsakyuen grins, glancing between the racer and his best friend. “Damn.”

“Cool it, cipher,” Norawit says, clinking his glass against his and downing pure gin.

The rest of the evening dissolves into stupid conversations and alcohol, and by the end of the shift Titicharoenrak is noticeably drunk. Strobe lights blur into hazy flashes, the music pounds the same rhythm into his skull, and his sense of balance starts slipping. It always hits him like this. He can drink endlessly without feeling anything, and then suddenly it all crashes down at once.

Phuwin vanished a while ago with some girl, Pahn disappeared too, and Norawit is left with no choice but to finish his shift and call a taxi.

“Fuck,” he mutters, accidentally knocking over a glass.

It doesn't hit the floor. Night catches it just in time, having walked up to the bar. He looks Norawit up and down, smirking at the glassy eyes and guilty smile.

"Looks like this table's done for tonight," he laughs.

"I'm totally fine," Norawit says, awkwardly pulling on his jacket and swaying.

"Right. Go home before your inner Hulk shows up like your brother's," Night says, gently holding his elbow. "You'll demolish the place. Though I wouldn't mind if he worked it off next time."

"No way," Titicharoenrak laughs, squinting. "We're not coming back here. This club costs us way too much."

Night laughs again and leads him out the back. Cool night air hits Norawit's face, and he exhales with a satisfied groan, stopping for a moment. The chill against his overheated skin helps, clearing his head just enough for him to realize they're heading toward a familiar car.

"What are you planning? Taking advantage of my drunk body?" he smirks, staggering along. "Just so you know, my ass is pure. I'm usually the one doing the fucking."

"Very important information, but useless to me," Night laughs. "I'm not driving you home. Another Jirochtikul took an interest in your ass."

They stop beside the Mustang, not the Martin. Night opens the passenger door and pushes him inside next to the driver. Nattawat smiles lightly, eyeing Norawit. Titicharoenrak squints one eye at him, then collapses back into the seat with a long groan.

"God damn it," he mutters, closing his eyes. "This is going to end badly."

"You know where he lives?" Night asks his brother.

"Yeah. Drove him once already," Natawat replies, starting the engine.

"Great. Drive safe," Night says, tapping the roof and closing the door.

"I made ten grand, by the way," Norawit says, handing Night the card.

"Let me guess. Ann?" Night says through the window, taking it. "The girl who fell under your spell."

"Seems like she's not eager to get married," Titicharoenrak laughs, clumsily ruffling his hair.

"Smart move," Night smiles. "Debt's cleared. Fair and square."

Nattawat drives him home through nearly empty streets, stopping at every red light just to glance at Norawit's soft, drunken eyes. Normally, drunk people disgust him. He hates the smell, the nonsense. He doesn't drink himself. But watching drunk Titicharoenrak is… fun.

He jokes nonstop, laughs loudly at himself, sings off-key with the music blasting through the open window. His light brown hair dances in the warm night air.

At another empty intersection, Nattawat slows, waiting for the green light despite the empty road. Part of him wants this drive to last longer. He turns the music down and notices Norawit unbuckling his seatbelt and scooting closer. The sharp scent of alcohol hits his nose.

Norawit's gaze drifts to his lips. Fingers trace the sharp line of his jaw.

"You're so handsome, Natt," he murmurs, brushing his fingertip over his Adam's apple.

"Is this the stage where you need to fuck someone?" Nattawat asks with a smile, eyes flicking to those tempting lips.

"Yeah. And you're right here," Titicharoenrak laughs, his breath warm against Nattawat's skin.

"Norawit, what are you doing?"

"What do you think? Hitting on you. You didn't seem opposed while watching me dance," he whispers, brushing his nose along his neck. "God, you smell so good."

"You're just drunk," Nattawat says, gently pushing his face away.

"True," Norawit smiles, biting his lip.

"And I don't sleep with drunk people."

"You never had drunk sex?" Titicharoenrak asks, shrugging off his jacket and slicking his hair back.

"No."

"Want me to be your first?" Norawit leans closer again.

"Sorry. You smell like prom queen and gin. You've used up your kiss quota tonight."

"Mmm, she's engaged. And you're jealous, baby," Norawit smirks, sliding his hand over Nattawat's stomach.

"Why would I be?"

"Because you like me. You want me. That chemistry you mentioned? Yeah."

"You said my sense of smell was broken," Nattawat mutters, swallowing hard.

Fuck. Even drunk, Titicharoenrak is dangerous. His hand slides lower, stroking him through his pants. Goosebumps ripple across Nattawat's skin as his breath quickens.

"Stop," he exhales.

“Make me,” Norawit whispers against his ear.

A car honks behind them. Nattawat jolts, checks the light, and pulls through the intersection, gripping the wheel.

The rest of the drive passes under Norawit’s heavy gaze. He leans back, studying Nattawat’s shaved temple, silver earrings, strong neck, pale skin.

“Feels like you’re undressing me with your eyes, sexy,” Nattawat smirks, parking. “Cool it.”

“I don’t have to use my eyes,” Norawit murmurs, tracing his neck.

“Another time. When you’re sober.”

“What’s with your alcohol issue?”

“I don’t like drunk people.”

“Boring. How do you relax then?”

“Racing. Cigarettes. Sex.”

Norawit suddenly leans in, stopping inches from a kiss. The air crackles between them. Nattawat doesn’t back down.

“You reek of Hendrick’s,” Nattawat murmurs. “Stop.”

“Girl, gin. Nothing ever pleases you. Don’t you want to kiss me and forget your hang-ups?” Norawit asks, lifting his chin. “Or why else do you come to my races and stare at me like a lovesick teenager?”

“Not tonight.”

“Fine,” Norawit smirks. “But I know another use for my lips.”

“For fuck’s sake, stop,” Nattawat groans.

He gets out, nearly stumbles, steadies himself against the Mustang, then starts toward his building.

“Let me walk you up. I’ll feel better,” Nattawat says, grabbing his elbow.

Inside, Norawit collapses onto the bed with a groan.

“God, that’s good,” he whispers.

There’s a lot of old furniture here, yet the apartment still feels cozy. Still, very little of it says anything about the tenant’s personality or taste. Most likely, these things belong to the owner, a woman who’s probably around seventy. The only things that signal a young man’s presence

in this place are the scent and a few details. A faint trace of men's cologne mixed with cigarette smoke. And an enormous flat-screen TV that doesn't fit the interior at all, a game console, and a coffee table beside the bed. On it several empty beer bottles and an overflowing ashtray.

Apparently, this is Norawit's favorite room. But despite the fact that he spends all his free time here, it feels lonely somehow. Everything is soaked in coldness, even though the apartment as a whole is warm and comfortable. It must be awful for him to live in such total solitude.

Nattawat glances at him and lets out a quiet sigh. The boy clumsily rubs his sleepy eyes like a small child, then pulls his phone out of the front pocket of his pants. He struggles with it for a few seconds before finally holding it out.

"Set an alarm for six a.m. I can't do it, the numbers are dancing," Titicharoenrak says.

Nattawat sits down on the edge of the bed beside him and fulfills the simple request. After placing the phone on the table, he looks at Norawit again.

"Thanks," the boy murmurs, closing his eyes.

"That wasn't hard."

"I'm not thanking you just for that. For bringing me here. For making sure I got home."

"You look exhausted. Sleep. You need to get up in three hours. It's going to be a rough morning, judging by how much you drank."

"Yeah," Titicharoenrak sighs, offering a weak smile. "But I'm used to it."

"You drink often?"

He gives a barely noticeable nod while looking at him, and Nattawat doesn't miss how sad he looks as he answers. As if he isn't happy about it himself but can't do anything about it. It's awful.

"Why?" Nattawat asks seriously, studying his face. "Why do you do this?"

"I don't know," Norawit exhales deeply. "I feel like shit, so I drink. I guess because it helps. My life feels like a roller coaster. And I'm riding it at an insane speed, in a cart with no safety belts, where I could fall out at any moment. I don't want to crash from the height, but sometimes I just don't have the strength to fight anymore. I'm tired," he says almost inaudibly.

"Is it because of North? Because you're constantly fixing his problems?" Nattawat guesses.

“That too. I live with constant thoughts about whether he’s even alive right now. Where he’s gotten himself into this time. What other trouble I’ll have to go through to help him. I want him to have a good life so badly, but I don’t know how to give him that.”

“Why don’t you just let it all go? He’s an adult. He should be responsible for what he does.”

“I can’t. He’s my brother. North is the most important thing in my life. Even if he never says it… I know he loves me too. And I know he hates causing me all these problems, but…” Norawit sighs heavily, lowering his gaze. “It’s complicated. I just can’t abandon him.”

“He doesn’t tell you he loves you? Even after everything you do for him?”

“Recently, he said he doesn’t need me at all,” Titicharoenrak lets out a bitter chuckle. “When we were kids, he talked about love. Now it’s hard for him. Things between us are really difficult right now. I’m afraid he’ll completely drift away.”

Nattawat sighs deeply, understanding that feeling all too well. He himself struggles to say the words out loud, maybe because he’s never heard them said to him. Not from his mother, not from his father, not from his brother. Never. For him, it feels strange. Night is the only one who shows him love through actions. Even though they grew up in different families and Nattawat could have pushed him away forever, the younger one instead supports him, trying to build a bond with him, something close to perfect intimacy.

“You do realize that alcohol addiction is a shitty way to deal with emotional and physical exhaustion, right?” he asks, looking at the tattoo on Norawit’s arm.

In a soft script, stretched across his forearm like a thread, are the words *United we stand*. From the letter d, a thin line trails off and breaks on the inside of his arm. The tattoo looks incredibly delicate and emotional despite its simplicity. It’s obviously unfinished or incomplete, because the second part belongs to someone else. Most likely, North.

“And you do realize that petty theft can lead to serious legal trouble, right?”

“Fine. Three to two,” Nattawat smiles.

“You’ve got a shitty life too. But I guess you’re stronger than me, since you don’t drown your problems in alcohol,” Norawit says with a frown, gently brushing Nattawat’s fingers with his own. “I know I’m doing the wrong thing. I just don’t know how to do it differently.”

“I don’t drink mine away only because I don’t want to end up at the very bottom, the one I’ve seen with my own eyes almost my entire life. But I have my own little sin,” Nattawat says, smiling bitterly.

Suddenly, a loud meow echoes through the room, and a white cat jumps onto the bed. It stares curiously at the guest and sniffs him. Jumu snorts displeased when Nattawat tries to pet him, then runs over to his owner.

“Not very welcoming,” Nattawat mutters.

“He’s a total daddy’s boy,” Titicharoenrak says, and his face suddenly lights up with such a bright, genuine smile. “Hey there, baby.”

He gently scratches the animal behind the ear, and it begins to purr contentedly, pressing closer to him. It’s almost unbelievable how tender and careful he is with it, while with everyone else he’s a complete bastard. Clearly, Norawit loves this fluffy creature deeply.

So this is his “son,” the one he buys milk for. He looks at the cat with such open, genuine affection, as if this small creature is the only thing that truly makes him happy. For some reason, that sight makes Nattawat feel a pang of sympathy, and a quiet smile curves at the corner of his lips.

Out of all the people surrounding Titicharoenrak, this is where he’s the most real. With his cat. Because the cat loves him with an absolute, unconditional kind of love, asking for nothing in return. It’s astonishing.

Watching him stroke the animal, Nattawat suddenly realizes that behind the hardened exterior there’s a man who desperately needs simple human warmth and love. He enjoys this small affection so deeply, so sincerely, that Nattawat’s chest tightens with an almost painful urge to pull him into an embrace.

Without fully thinking it through, he leans closer, cups his jaw, gently turning his face toward him, and presses his lips to his in a soft kiss. At first it’s shy, hesitant, uncertain, but then he exhales deeply and begins to kiss him more fully, more sensually, letting go of all the strange rules and fears cluttering his mind.

From the very first second, a pleasant current shoots through his body, and he boldly slips his tongue into the other’s mouth. He exhales in quiet satisfaction, savoring the moment.

He really can’t stand the smell of alcohol, but right now, he doesn’t want to push him away over something so insignificant. What Titicharoenrak needs isn’t a lecture about unhealthy coping mechanisms, but simple understanding. And Nattawat understands him. His own life isn’t filled with bright, easy days either.

They’re like two wounded souls, each carrying their own scars, who happened to meet just to give each other a few minutes of silent unity.

So to hell with all the barriers.

Norawit gently pulls him closer by the nape of his neck and kisses him back without hesitation. His heart stutters, his breath faltering as a warm wave of excitement slips through his body. Still, he doesn’t try to seduce his handsome guest again, doesn’t even show much interest in continuing. He’s probably just too tired, drifting into another stage of drunkenness, where all he wants is to curl up and sleep sweetly.

When the kiss lingers a little too long, Jumu suddenly bites Nattawat on the forearm, forcing him to pull back with a loud groan. Titicharoenrak laughs softly and pets the cat’s head.

“Good boy,” he says.

“You’ve been lied to. That’s not a cat,” Nattawat protests, rubbing his arm. “He bites like a guard dog.”

“He’s jealous of me. Actually, that’s something you two have in common,” Titicharoenrak smirks.

“I wasn’t jealous.”

“Oh, sure,” Norawit drawls with a smile. “That’s why you pointed out that I smell like prom queen. You’re possessive, huh?”

“I’m not used to sharing. Especially not things I like,” Nattawat replies, leaning in to press a short kiss to his lips again.

“You’ve got competition,” Norawit says lightly. “He doesn’t like sharing me either.”

Nattawat reaches out toward the cat, but Jumu hisses indignantly and walks away with his nose held high. Full of attitude. Just like his owner.

“Alright,” Nattawat sighs, glancing at the clock. “It’s late. I should go. It’s not just you who has to get up in three hours.”

“Stay,” Titicharoenrak says, gently catching his wrist.

“Just because I kissed you doesn’t mean that—”

“Shut up. It’s three in the morning. Where are you even going?”

“Isn’t this a little weird? We barely know each other.”

“Our tongues know each other,” Norawit says calmly. “Pretty intimately, Natt.”

“Idiot,” Nattawat laughs. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll rob you while you’re sleeping?”

“I’ve got nothing worth stealing. Even if you try, you’ll be disappointed.”

“Your bike’s parked downstairs, right? And the keys are on the shelf by the mirror?” Nattawat narrows his eyes.

Norawit smiles and lets out a tired sigh.

“Stay. I promise I won’t touch you. Just sleep with me.”

“Well, if you promise,” Nattawat smirks, lying down beside him.

Titicharoenrak wraps an arm around him from behind, burying his nose into Nattawat’s shoulder. The warmth of his body is so comforting that he relaxes almost instantly. Nattawat’s hand rests over Norawit’s arm, the one holding his slim waist. He shifts slightly, searching for a comfortable position, while Norawit pulls the blanket over them and exhales deeply, closing his eyes.

The soft scent of fabric conditioner mixed with cigarettes and the sweet aroma of dark hair fills his senses. He likes it so much that a small, contented smile appears on his lips. So warm. So pleasant. It turns out he needs so little to feel at ease — just human warmth beside him. And suddenly, he doesn't feel quite as lonely as he usually does.

"Good night, Nattawat," Norawit whispers.

"Good night, sexy," Nattawat murmurs, smiling softly as he closes his eyes.

Chapter 3: III

The incredible scent of something freshly baked, sweet, warm, and comforting pulls Norawit out of sleep early in the morning, and a soft smile tugs at his lips before he even opens his eyes. The smell takes him straight back to a happier past. To when he was about seven years old. To mornings that always began with a kiss on the cheek and the gentle voice of a woman who loved him and North more than anything in the world.

His mother would be in the kitchen, making breakfast for the whole family, while his father sat at the table with a fresh newspaper and a cup of coffee. He and his brother would fight over who got to the sink first to wash up, and only then would they get ready for school, but never before devouring a massive portion of fluffy waffles drowned in caramel syrup. These tender, precious childhood memories have stayed buried deep in his heart even after all these years, and every time they surface, something inside him warms instantly.

He opens one eye and squints at the sunlight spilling through the curtains. A slightly cool morning draft slips in through the open window, brushing over his back and raising goosebumps on his skin. The room is already flooded with light, which means his alarm is about to go off. Or did he already sleep through it?

Norawit bolts upright, and the walls immediately start spinning. Fuck. Yesterday's fun is catching up to him fast. His head feels like it's splitting open, as if someone cracked his skull without anesthesia, and his throat is dry like the Sahara. He never should've drunk gin, it always leaves him like this. He rubs his temples slowly, elbows resting on his knees, letting out a quiet groan.

He checks the time on his phone and realizes he woke up five minutes before the alarm. Five whole minutes he could have spent sleeping. It feels like he slept for maybe five seconds at most. His body aches, heavy and exhausted, like he's been run over.

Then he hears a strange noise coming from the kitchen and lifts his brows, casting a wary glance toward the hallway. It sounds like someone's washing dishes. Wait, does his apartment smell like food?

At first, he thinks the scent must be coming from another apartment. It happens often when the window's open. His neighbor loves baking early in the morning, constantly teasing his stomach. But then he hears the quiet clink of dishes again, and memory snaps into place as he runs a hand through his hair.

The club. He got pretty drunk thanks to his friends. Nattawat was with him. He'd asked him to stay the night, but the bed is empty.

So that's who's up so early.

Norawit stretches, wincing at the headache, and yawns. Three hours of sleep passed in a blink. Still, he hasn't slept this deeply in a long time, completely out cold. Exhaustion must've finally won. This past week drained him both physically and emotionally, so much so that he didn't wake up once from anxiety or nightmares like he usually does.

He exhales deeply, sits there for a few minutes staring at nothing, trying to wake up, then follows the delicious scent growing stronger with every step. God, when was the last time he woke up to the smell of food at home? He can't even remember.

He steps into the kitchen and freezes.

Nattawat is there.

Norawit leans against the doorway, arms folding over his chest as he watches quietly. His guest moves unhurriedly at the stove, flipping something in a pan, swaying gently to the calm melody playing from a vintage radio. It's ridiculous how cute it is. Nattawat hums along softly, and Norawit notices how pleasant and melodic his voice sounds.

Does he sing? Even just in the shower? He definitely has an ear for it. It'd be nice to hear him properly someday.

His gaze drifts lazily over his shoulders, a slim waist, and an absolutely perfect ass, and he smiles to himself. Built flawlessly. Damn it.

Nattawat is also trying, once again, to make friends with his temperamental cat. Jumu sits on the windowsill, glaring at the stranger with pure disdain. He clearly doesn't understand why this human is acting like he owns the place, the cat is not used to outsiders at all. They're both hilarious.

Nattawat reaches out to pet him, offering a treat as a peace offering, but Jumu just snorts indignantly and turns away. Clearly unimpressed.

Norawit silently laughs, grabs a bottle of water from the fridge, and takes a long drink.

"Seriously," Nattawat mutters with a sigh. "You're unbearable, just like your owner. What's your problem? I just want to pet you."

"It's useless," Norawit says calmly. "You can't buy him that easily. Independent, self-obsessed man. Doesn't fall for cheap tricks."

"Why is he so mean to me? Cats usually love affection. He's not like this with you."

Norawit shrugs innocently, finishing half the bottle before sighing in relief. The cold water feels like it brings him back to life. He kneels and gently strokes Jumu's face, and the cat melts instantly, purring and closing his eyes.

Nattawat groans, scrunches his nose, and shakes his head.

"That easy?"

“Told you. Daddy’s boy.”

“You’re perfect for each other,” Nattawat grumbles, turning back to the stove. “A lovely couple.”

Norawit chuckles, steps closer, wraps his arms around him from behind, and presses a light kiss to his neck. Nattawat flinches as goosebumps break out along his arms. He tries to hide how much the gesture affects him, but a stupid smile slips onto his lips anyway.

“Looks like you’re making yourself at home in my kitchen,” Norawit says, giving his ass a playful pat and peeking over his shoulder.

“Your fridge is empty. Do you eat anything besides beer?”

“Yes,” Norawit replies lazily. “Fast food.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I can’t cook,” Norawit shrugs, wincing as his head throbs.

“Doesn’t anyone take care of you? You’re going to drop dead before thirty at this rate.”

“Nope. My family is one problematic brother, and someone should really be watching him instead.”

Norawit hops up onto the kitchen island, lights a cigarette, and watches Nattawat cook. Smoke fills the room as he follows every movement with quiet interest. For reasons he can’t quite explain, this attractive racer makes him feel both strangely comfortable and dangerously eager to pin him to the table and act on every indecent thought he has.

The second feeling doesn’t surprise him, the chemistry between them is undeniable. The first one, though, leaves him oddly stunned.

Nattawat looks… cozy. And it’s strange. But somehow, everything feels natural between them. No awkwardness. He rummages through someone else’s cabinets without hesitation, washes dishes, brews tea, ordinary domestic things usually reserved for people close to you.

The only similar memories Norawit has are of his mother doing these things for him. After she died, he was always the one taking care of others.

“You cook well,” Norawit says, taking a drag. “Smells amazing.”

“Not amazingly, but I know a few things. My mom hated cooking with a passion, and I was always hungry, so I had to learn. First real dish I made was when I was seven. Not carbonara, obviously, but mac and cheese is a classic,” Nattawat smiles.

“Sounds pretty good,” Norawit smiles back. “You were independent early, huh?”

“Yeah. Pretty much on my own.”

“Why did you and your brother grow up in different families? That’s unusual. Kids usually aren’t split up.”

Nattawat lifts a brow, amused that Norawit knows this much. It was never a secret, exactly, most people in the street racing scene know they come from completely different worlds. The details are blurry, but the core truth is obvious.

They’re brothers. Raised under very different circumstances.

It was clear from the very first moment they both showed up at the Loop.

“It’s a long story. A pretty tragic outcome of our parents’ messed-up relationship. Even now, we don’t fully understand how things ended up like this. We weren’t a planned pregnancy. Back then, our father was married to another woman. Our mother was his underage mistress — she was only seventeen. He had no intention of having children or living happily ever after with her. But life decided to throw in a surprise. And to make it worse, it turned out to be a double one. Can you imagine their shock?”

Nattawat lets out a bitter chuckle.

“Of course, his wife found out. She filed for divorce and walked away with more than half of his assets. After that, he married our mother — unwillingly. Maybe he thought it was the ‘right’ thing to do, but it only made everything worse. He’s a monstrous abuser. Completely incapable of building healthy relationships and utterly uninterested in children. The only thing he’s ever loved is his career.”

“What does he even do?” Titicharoenrak asks. “All I’ve heard is that he’s rich as hell and a total bastard.”

“That’s accurate. And on top of that, he’s the most two-faced person you’ll ever meet. In certain circles, everyone knows what he really is, a corrupt judge.”

“Your father is a judge?” Titicharoenrak’s eyes widen in shock.

“Yeah. Before that, he ran a successful construction business, which his first wife took during the divorce. After that, he went back to his profession — and did just fine there too.”

“Jesus. So you’re the son of a city judge and a petty criminal,” Titicharoenrak laughs.

“Every family needs a problem child,” Nattawat replies with a faint smile.

“So how did their marriage end up?”

“As badly as possible. Things were already bad, and then they got unbearable. I don’t even understand how their hatred for each other grew that deep.”

“And they divorced?” Titicharoenrak asks.

“Yeah. My mom lasted four years. She told me about the constant abuse — physical and psychological. I understand why she left. I just don’t understand why she endured it for so

long. Probably because of money. My father forced her to sign a prenup when they got married, so during the divorce, all the power was on his side. Especially considering who he was. She had no choice but to agree to his terms, just to avoid ending up with nothing."

"One of his conditions for a 'peaceful' divorce was Night. I guess he didn't want the responsibility of two unwanted children at once, but he needed at least one heir. So he left her with me and a payout. I barely knew my brother or my father until my teens. We almost never saw each other. I spent most of my childhood in Savannah with my grandmother, while Night lived here with him. A few years later, my grandmother passed away. Then my mother died too, and my father was forced to take me in. I was fifteen."

"Did he stay in touch with you all that time?"

"Yeah. Sometimes he called. Sometimes he showed up for my birthdays. He hated seeing our mother, so those visits usually ended in screaming matches. And despite his attempts to 'be a father,' I never once felt like it brought him joy. I was never something he needed. So I never reached for him either. He wasn't ready to be a father — damn career addict. I was a stranger to him, and he was a stranger to me. And no one tried to change that."

"He didn't take care of you at all? Didn't bring your brother so you could spend time together?"

"The only way he solved problems was with money and connections. And he had plenty of both. So most of the time, he just paid me off — and probably my brother too. It made his life easier. Technically a father, but not really. He rarely brought Night to see me. He didn't raise him either, even though they lived together. There was a nanny for him. For me, he opened a bank account my mother controlled. That money could've been our ticket to a better future… but she spent it on alcohol," Nattawat says quietly.

"So that's where it comes from," Titicharoenrak mutters, frowning. "She was addicted?"

"Yeah."

"Badly?"

"At first, no. But it got worse every day. Though with a husband like that, it's surprising she didn't drink herself to death immediately. The divorce destroyed her. Addiction finished the job. My father cut off her resources, and everything in our lives started falling apart."

"What do you mean?"

"They were in open conflict for years. Maybe just mutual hatred, but I think my mom knew something she wasn't supposed to. She used it against him, trying to squeeze more money out of him. Whenever we were broke, money suddenly appeared, even though she hadn't worked in years. I guess his patience snapped. He started threatening her. Took away her job, her friends, her home. Threatened prison. He could've framed her easily. We even had to move. Over the years, things only got worse. They were constantly fighting, dividing things, tearing each other apart. And she broke."

“She started living recklessly. Drinking, partying, bringing men home. Disgusting men. It’s horrible to say, but in a way, I’m relieved her miserable life is over.”

“I’ve never heard anyone talk about their mother’s death like that.”

“I’m not glad she’s gone. I’m glad she’s not in pain anymore. She was unhappy. Her whole life was hatred toward my father and the pain he caused her. When she was young, she met a rich, older businessman and probably thought it was a fairytale. But it was a trap. He made her like this. He made her want to die. She used to tell me, ‘Any of us can die at any moment. My tragedy is that it hasn’t happened to me yet.’”

“Fuck,” Norawit whispers, running a hand through his hair. “Was it the alcohol?”

“No. An accident.”

“Oh,” he exhales. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. No matter how bad of a mother she was, deep down she was a good person. She didn’t give me much love, but she gave me life,” Nattawat says softly.

Titicharoenrak drags his hands through his hair and exhales heavily. It’s a horrifying story. One that leaves too many questions unasked. It’s terrifying to imagine a child growing up with an alcoholic mother and her lovers, and then ending up in a family where no one cares. He and North were lucky. They had a genuinely happy childhood, even if it was short. But the twins never had that. No childhood. No youth. Orphans with living parents. One had everything and nothing at the same time. The other never knew a good life at all. All they ever had was the illusion of family.

Nattawat exhales, pushing the memories away, and looks at him closely. He notices the pillow marks on Norawit’s face, the way he clearly feels like hell. The heavy conversation has left a crease between his perfect brows.

“What, hangover kicking in?” Nattawat asks, deliberately changing the subject.

“Captain Obvious,” Titicharoenrak smirks, snapping back to reality.

“Do you even remember how much you drank?” Nattawat asks, turning off the stove.

“Good question,” Norawit squints, exhaling a thick cloud of smoke. “No idea. A lot?”

“Yeah. And it shows. Hungry?”

“You gonna feed me?” Norawit asks playfully.

“What do you like for breakfast?” Nattawat smiles, openly staring at his bare torso.

Titicharoenrak notices. Smiles. Licks his lips.

“I’m not picky. Whatever you offer.”

“Choices are limited. I’m not as good as you think.”

“I think you’re very talented.”

“We’re still talking about food, right?” Nattawat laughs.

“Breakfast,” Titicharoenrak laughs back.

“Well, I cooked for myself, but since you’re here, I guess I’ll share.”

He drenches the pancakes in syrup, sticks his finger under the dispenser, and licks it off with a deep moan. Nattawat smirks smugly, catching the unmistakably hungry look aimed at him, and raises an innocent brow. Norawit shakes his head and sits across from him, breathing in the smell.

“Since I’m here?” he laughs, then suddenly winces, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Wait. This is my apartment. You’re the guest.”

“You know,” Nattawat says through a mouthful of food, “when you sleep, you hold onto the person next to you like a little kid. You wouldn’t let me go. And at dawn, you threw a leg over me. Took real effort to escape.”

“You could’ve pretended none of that happened,” Norawit mutters. “I’m just used to sleeping alone.”

“Sure,” Nattawat smiles softly. “But it was cute.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Norawit says flatly.

Nattawat chuckles. Titicharoenrak digs into breakfast. It’s damn good. So good a satisfied groan slips out before he can stop it. Care like this is rare for him — unfamiliar, but painfully nice.

“What did you even make this from? I don’t have food.”

“It’s simple. You have eggs.”

“Yes, I do have those,” Norawit laughs.

“The rest I borrowed from the neighbor.”

“You went to the neighbor at six in the morning?”

“Yep.”

“And she gave you everything instead of killing you?”

“As you can see. I negotiate well.”

“That’s insane. She yells at me for existing.”

“You’re good with cats. I’m good with people.”

“Smartass.”

“Don’t thank me too much for finally having a proper breakfast.”

“Thank you. It’s really good,” Norawit says sincerely.

He exhales again, rubbing his temples as his head pounds.

“I hate this feeling.”

“But you were celebrating last night,” Nattawat smirks.

“Celebrating?”

“You paid off your debt. Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“That part I remember.”

“So there’s stuff you don’t?”

“We didn’t sleep together, did we?” Norawit asks cautiously.

“No,” Nattawat laughs. “But you tried really hard.”

“I still got you into bed,” Norawit smirks proudly.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I was just too lazy to go home,” Nattawat says, scrunching his nose.

“I convinced you to stay — with the promise of behaving.”

“See? You remember everything.”

“We didn’t discuss the morning though,” Titicharoenrak says playfully.

“Oh? Hangover gone already?” Nattawat teases.

Norawit smiles, resting his chin in his hand, studying him. Messy dark hair. Kind eyes. A dangerous exterior hiding something soft and sincere. Some people are just naturally comforting. Nattawat is one of them — when he feels safe.

“You’re gonna burn a hole in me. Easy, handsome,” Nattawat says smugly.

“I’m admiring you. You don’t seem to mind.”

“Go ahead. But let’s talk so it’s less awkward.”

“Okay. Let’s talk.” Titicharoenrak pauses. “How are you?”

“Good. I didn’t drink.”

“What do you do for a living, Natt?”

“That was a jump,” Nattawat laughs. “I’m a tattoo artist. A racer…”

“And at night, Clyde Chestnut,” Norawit cuts in with a grin.

“Well,” Nattawat shrugs innocently, “we all have flaws.”

“Fair. So you race. They say you’re a legend.”

“And you’re a legend among bikers.”

Titicharoenrak raises a brow, stops chewing.

“I did my research,” Nattawat adds.

“I wouldn’t say legend. But yeah. I’m damn good.”

“So modest.”

“Important question. Car or bike?”

“Too easy. Car.”

“Ever ridden a bike?”

“Tried, but—”

“Didn’t work. Got it.”

“What?”

“You’d change your mind if you learned. So. Racing or cruising for fun?”

“Racing for fun.”

“Good answer. Supercar or classic?”

“Supercar.”

“Track or street?”

“Track.”

“Marathon or quick finish?” Norawit asks, voice low and teasing.

“Marathon. I like long runs,” Nattawat smirks shamelessly.

“I’ll remember that,” Norawit says softly. “Impulse or total control?”

“Impulse.”

“I noticed. Your technique is perfect, but your brakes are a disaster. You’re the type who’s never satisfied with the speed they’re given. You want faster than the wind. That’s adrenaline addiction, or a lack of self-control. You don’t fear speed. And that’s the most dangerous thing on the road.”

“Do you moonlight as a psychotherapist or something?”

“No. It’s just obvious from the way you drive. I could tell you feel safe inside a car, but you have no real idea what speed can actually do to you. It’s not only an incredible rush — it can be terrifying if you lose control. That’s the difference between a car and a motorcycle. In a car, you feel protected.”

“I’ve got everything under control on the road,” Nattawat says, frowning in annoyance.

“Handling a car is way easier. You don’t have to keep your body balanced every second,” Norawit scoffs.

“I could beat you on anything. It’s about the driver, not the vehicle.”

“Oooh,” Titicharoenrak drawls with a smirk. “Sounds like a challenge.”

Nattawat looks at that infuriatingly smug expression and feels a sharp urge to wipe that damn grin off his face. Does he really think he could win if they lined up side by side at the start? That’s bold. Nattawat is good, not perfect, but in drifting, Norawit wouldn’t stand a chance. Watching him try would be very entertaining.

“A race?” Nattawat asks, arching a brow in challenge.

“Let’s do it. If it’s really about the driver, let’s see what each of us can do. What are we betting?” Norawit asks.

“Anything,” Nattawat shrugs, stepping closer. “You choose. I don’t care.”

Titicharoenrak’s gaze drags over him slowly, greedily, from head to toe. Then he grabs Nattawat by the hand and pulls him onto his lap. Nattawat settles in comfortably, spreading his legs and lazily threading his fingers through the light brown hair at the back of Norawit’s head.

“You’re a dangerously competitive type, Natt,” Titicharoenrak smiles. “I don’t even know what I’d want as a prize.”

“Yeah. I am,” Nattawat replies, smiling back as his hands slide over Norawit’s bare shoulders. “I love beating cocky assholes like you.”

“A tattoo,” Norawit says, his eyes tracing the veins in Nattawat’s arm.

“What?” Nattawat blinks.

“If I win, you get a tattoo. One I choose.”

“Damn,” Nattawat laughs. “Now that’s serious.”

“What, scared, great racer?” Norawit mocks, smiling sweetly.

“Not a chance,” Nattawat snaps, grabbing a fistful of Norawit’s hair and pulling his head back. “I’ll destroy you.”

“And if you win,” Norawit says calmly, “you choose my tattoo.”

Nattawat thinks for a few seconds, then nods. “Deal. Get that perfect ass ready, I’m already designing something for it.”

Norawit grins, clearly pleased, and pulls him in by the neck. His lips capture Nattawat’s in a slow, sweet kiss, sealing their playful bet.

The roar of the spectators gathered behind the barriers of the Loop sent a shiver racing down Norawit’s spine. Every time he heard it, he felt like a real rock star. As if he’d filled a small stadium, all of them chanting his name, waiting for a spectacular show. Another part of the crowd was shouting Nattawat’s name. They were all here for one reason — the showdown.

Rumors about a race between the two titans of this track spread at lightning speed, and by the very next day people were already waiting in eager anticipation for the outcome of what was quickly becoming a near-legendary run.

For Norawit and Nattawat, though, it was nothing more than entertainment.

Everyone around them was convinced this was some kind of ego contest, a desperate attempt to prove something to each other. But really — what was the point? Nattawat was exceptional in his own lane, and his victory in Osaka had already proven that. He’d long been recognized as a leader, unmatched among street racers. Norawit, on the other hand, was a flawless professional in a completely different discipline on the Loop. For them, this race was a lighthearted game, a thrill for the sake of the process itself.

They could go head-to-head on almost equal footing, and that alone was enough to spark excitement in both of them.

Nattawat was naturally competitive. Getting him to agree to this kind of madness was easy. He loved proving his superiority — if only to himself. He loved the idea of racing side by side with someone as unhinged as Norawit. For the most part, that was why he raced at all, for the moment when his car crossed the finish line and everyone else was left behind.

The only thing he hated was competing against weak opponents.

He deliberately avoided races where rookies or noticeably weaker drivers lined up beside him. What was the fun in that? None at all. But Norawit was different, and everyone knew it. He'd started out racing cars before switching to a bike. Nattawat had been watching his races all week and noticed that out of ten runs, nine belonged to him.

Knocking him down a peg would be a special kind of pleasure.

Especially with such a tempting prize on the line.

Norawit sat astride his motorcycle, watching with open curiosity as Nattawat parked nearby. His car was a real monster, growling low and quiet, sending a pleasant shiver somewhere deep in the gut. It was clearly heavily modified and technically superior to most of what was here tonight.

Nattawat stepped out, shot him a playful wink, and leaned back against the hood. He crossed his arms over his chest, slowly raking Norawit with his gaze before smirking.

"So," he said, "ready to lose?"

"Are you asking yourself that?" Norawit replied with a grin.

"I think a colorful tattoo on your ass, some stupid little cat, would fit perfectly with your kitty biker aesthetic. You are a cat person, after all."

Norawit burst out laughing, rolling his neck like a fighter warming up before a match.

"Honestly, doesn't sound that bad. Maybe I should get it anyway. No bet required," he said, arching a brow.

"What, giving up before we even start? Weak," Nattawat teased, clicking his tongue. "I thought you had stamina."

"Oh, you have no idea how wrong you are, Natt. Giving up isn't in my vocabulary."

"You look like you're already running out of steam."

"On the contrary. I've got more than enough energy to fuck you at your own game and knock that crown right off your head in front of everyone."

"The fact that you want to fuck me is old news," Nattawat replied smugly.

"Don't pretend you don't want me to," Norawit laughed. "Mr. I-don't-like-sharing-what-I-like."

"I wasn't jealous."

"Then I wasn't hitting on you."

“Alright,” Nattawat said, tilting his head. “Four to two. You got me again.”

“Oh my god, will you two just fuck already?” Phuwin groaned as he walked up. “It’s unbearable to watch this. Even I’m sexually frustrated at this point.”

He and Norawit exchanged their signature handshake before Phuwin slung an arm around his shoulders, glancing at Nattawat, who couldn’t hold back his laughter.

“Hey, dragon.”

“Hey, cipher.”

“Ready to lose?” Phuwin asked, waggling his eyebrows as he adjusted the bandana on his forehead.

“You too?” Nattawat snorted.

“Sorry, but I’m rooting for him,” Phuwin said, patting Norawit’s cheek. “This baby’s worth it.”

“Hey, you’re supposed to be on my team,” Nattawat laughed.

“I sit comfortably on two chairs,” Phuwin shrugged. “You’ve already got an army of fans. I can’t betray my best friend.”

“Fine. I’ll survive. So what are we racing on, sexy?” Nattawat said lazily. “It needs to be fair.”

“I’m afraid you’ll kill yourself on a bike, and I have big plans for your ass,” Norawit replied. “I’ll give you a pass. We’re racing cars.”

“And what exactly are you driving?” Nattawat smirked.

Phuwin shot Norawit a knowing grin, then flicked his gaze toward Nattawat and nodded into the darkness. Headlights flashed on, his dark green beauty emerging like a predator, and he tossed the keys to Norawit.

The car looked aggressive, bold, perfectly matching its owner. Like a hunter ready to devour its next victim. The Skyline needed no introduction. Sculpted hood, sharp halogen headlights, massive aerodynamic bumper. Everyone here knew that car.

Nattawat whistled, shaking his head with a grin.

“Damn.”

“I’m lending it to him for one race,” Phuwin said.

“Not bad. Worthy competition,” Nattawat admitted, patting his own hood. “But my baby’s still better.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself,” Norawit said as he slid into the driver’s seat. “Don’t worry, I won’t be too rough with you.”

“My Mustang is the only car on this track that’s never seen anyone else’s taillights,” Nattawat shot back. “You think I’m scared?”

“Then tonight I’ll take its virginity, baby,” Norawit said with a sly wink.

Phuwin laughed loudly, quickly briefing him on the car’s strengths and weaknesses. Nattawat drove off toward the starting line. Norawit only half-listened, catching the most important details.

“You got all that?” Phuwin asked.

“Yeah. I’m not new to this, man. I used to race cars.”

“Good. Then don’t press that,” he added, pointing to a red button.

“That nitro?” Norawit asked.

“Exactly.”

“How long can I hold it?”

“Norawit, no.”

“Why?”

“Hit it before a turn and you’ll lose control. I don’t want to scrape your brains off the asphalt. You’re good, but it’s been a while since you raced cars.”

“So how long?” Norawit pressed, narrowing his eyes.

Phuwin sighed.

“Until the tank’s empty, technically. But no more than fifteen seconds. Holy shit, you’re not actually going to use it, are you? That’s dangerous. Natt won’t use boost, your rules are different.”

“Exactly,” Norawit grinned. “And I will. That’s how I’ll catch him off guard. Nobody said playing dirty was forbidden.”

“You’re a devil,” Phuwin muttered. “If you do it, only when the throttle’s wide open. Fully open intake, stronger effect, safer—”

“Shut up. I know how nitro works. I’m a mechanic, for fuck’s sake,” Norawit laughed.

“Alright. You know the track, but don’t overdo it. This isn’t your bike. Remember, you need to slow down before corners. Natt is deadly in turns. He drifts into them. We’re not that good at it.”

“Got it. Now go.”

“Good luck, Norawit,” Phuwin winked. “Take care of yourself.”

Norawit nodded and drove to the starting line.

He stopped at the white line and rolled down the passenger window. Nattawat lowered his own, feeling Norawit’s gaze on him. Old-school rock blasted from his car, perfectly fitting the moment. He turned it down slightly and looked over.

“You can still back out,” Nattawat said. “While you’ve got the chance.”

Norawit laughed, lifted his hand, shaped his fingers like a gun, and mimed a shot.

“Don’t cry when you see my taillights right in front of your nose,” he said with a charming smile.

“Oooh,” Nattawat groaned dramatically before laughing. “Empty threats.”

“We’ll see how empty.”

“Relax,” Nattawat winked. “I’m in a good mood tonight. I’ll give you a ten-second head start for those pretty lips.”

Norawit slicks his hair back and lets out a self-assured hum. He leans into the seat, staring through the windshield, then slowly raises his hand to his lips, brushing his fingertips over them with a faint, knowing smile. He already knows perfectly well that this reckless racer has a particular weakness for them, and his thoughts drift back to the way they kissed yesterday morning. From the corner of his eye, he catches Nattawat watching him closely, clearly lost in the same memories. Norawit smirks smugly and flips him off. Nattawat laughs, turns the music up, starts singing along, and bobs his head to the beat with infectious enthusiasm.

At that moment, Pahn steps forward to signal the start. She salutes Nattawat first, then her old friend, flashing them both a charming smile. This is the most thrilling part of any race. There are only two moments that matter this much: the start and the finish. They carry the same energy, but at the start there’s raw enthusiasm, while near the finish you’re forced to realistically assess your chances, focusing only on the white markings on the asphalt and the rivals behind you.

Pahn slips one bra strap off her shoulder, sticks her arm out, and shouts loudly, “One.”

Nattawat presses the gas, and his car answers with a low, throaty growl. The sound alone drives everyone who loves cars absolutely wild. It’s sensual, like the guttural moan of a perfect lover in the middle of sex, and Nattawat grins with satisfaction as he glances at Norawit.

Pahn repeats the move with the other strap and shouts, “Two.”

Now Norawit hits the gas. Phu’s car responds instantly, obedient and powerful. Its growl is just as beautiful, sending shivers through the crowd and a wave of anticipation through his

body. He turns toward his opponent and catches Nattawat's pleased expression. There are demons dancing in Nattawat's eyes now, making it painfully obvious just how addicted he is to this feeling.

Extreme situations like this trigger an immediate response in the brain. The hypothalamus activates certain processes, causing a sudden surge of adrenaline. The hormone is released into the bloodstream and spreads through every nerve ending. The pulse quickens, pupils dilate, and the heart begins to pound harder. That's adrenaline, one of the most intoxicating sensations there is.

Finally, they see Pahn unfasten her bra behind her back. She looks from one car to the other, anticipation curling into a smile on her red lips. With a sharp motion, she yanks it out from under her shirt and shouts, "Go!"

The two titans of the Loop launch forward in a flash, leaving her behind in a cloud of smoke and dust. The feeling of slamming the gas and starting a race can't be compared to anything else in the world. It's a pure, overwhelming satisfaction with the moment you're living, a moment that is never the same twice. You're genuinely happy, and your problems simply disappear. There's nothing else around you except the asphalt, the lane, the speed, and the roaring engine. Your nerves hum beneath your skin, and a wide smile spreads across your face on its own. It's an absolute moment of happiness.

It's like the instant you first realize you're in love with someone. Euphoria. A pleasant ache pierces your heart, and it flutters wildly in your chest. You're happy just breathing the same air as the object of your affection, and when they return your feelings, the world suddenly becomes vibrant and colorful. You understand that the source of this euphoria is right there beside you. The same thing happens on the road, when the car responds perfectly to your every move and the two of you become one. The sensation floods your entire body in a warm wave, from head to toe.

They race nose to nose all the way to the first turn, the crowd screaming in excitement as both drivers focus completely on the road. No one has ever gotten this close to Nattawat during a race, and the spectators lose their minds. They film everything, cheering and applauding wildly. This track is special because they both know it inside and out. All it takes is one lap, and for them it'll fly by in a heartbeat. If it ends in a tie, the second lap will decide everything.

A few seconds later, Norawit eases off the gas as they approach the turn, but Nattawat keeps pushing like a madman. On this stretch of the track, he predictably pulls ahead, only slowing down right before the corner. He enters it with a smooth, perfectly controlled drift. The crowd roars in approval, whistling and shouting. He straightens out quickly and floors it again.

The Skyline follows him into the turn, though not as cleanly or professionally as the Mustang. The rear end skids slightly, but Norawit controls it skillfully, losing only a few precious seconds before pushing the car almost to its limit again and catching up. He's practically breathing down Nattawat's rear bumper now, but the Mustang starts weaving across the road, blocking any chance to overtake.

"Asshole," Norawit laughs.

He manages to get even closer and pull alongside him, but another turn looms ahead. He decides to take it at speed. The physics of drifting are simple in theory: when entering a turn, the rear wheels are forced into a slide by a sudden increase in torque. The trajectory causes the rear of the car to move ahead of the front, and under the right conditions, the car can be held in a drift through the entire corner. Afterward, the rear wheels regain traction, and the car stabilizes. In practice, though, it's incredibly difficult and requires long training. Luckily, Norawit has some experience.

Nattawat doesn't expect such a sharp move and hesitates for a fraction of a second, just enough for Norawit to pass him. He shouts in triumph. Norawit tries to pull the same stunt, but the speed is too high. The car doesn't adjust in time. The rear wheels clip the shoulder hard, and the car starts losing traction. He nearly crashes into the barrier, but by burning rubber under heavy braking, he manages to stop just in time.

Heart pounding wildly with adrenaline, Norawit watches as the Mustang slips perfectly through the turn, leaving a cloud of white smoke behind. He exhales in frustration. His phone rings inside the car, but he ignores it. He restarts the engine and accelerates hard, closing the distance between them again. Now he's really gotten under Nattawat's skin. Damn it, Nattawat is insanely good at this. Racing him is pure pleasure.

Norawit yanks the gear lever and presses the gas harder, rapidly catching up. Adrenaline surges through his blood so violently that his heart feels like it's trying to tear out of his chest, each heavy beat sending pain to his temples. He can hear the crowd screaming even through the closed windows, and the roar of the engines makes his ears ring. It only fuels his desire to wipe the floor with this handsome king of the Loop right in front of everyone.

He exits the final turn and realizes that his only chance to steal the win is right now. The finish line is ahead.

Nattawat is convinced he'll cross it first, so he cruises confidently down the straight at high speed, not trying to widen the gap too much. The Skyline creeps closer to the Mustang's bumper, waiting for the perfect moment to use a forbidden move. Nattawat keeps him on a tight leash, refusing to let him slip past the body line.

Norawit grips the steering wheel until his knuckles turn white and grins mischievously. He swerves slightly, and it works. Nattawat moves into the other lane, trying to block him, but Norawit instantly switches back, surges ahead, and slams the nitro button.

The car explodes forward, accelerating so fast it feels like light speed. The rows of spectators and the track markings blur into streaks before his eyes. The Mustang falls far behind, and Norawit eases off the boost. Just a little more, and he'll beat the local star. He wonders briefly if this will hurt Nattawat's pride.

The phone rings again inside the car, the third time in the last minute. Norawit sighs irritably and presses the button on the steering wheel. His phone, connected via Bluetooth, picks up immediately.

"Shit. I'm a little busy right now, can we—"

“Norawit!” his brother screams, his voice filled with sheer terror.

Something inside him shatters at that sound. His entire body starts shaking with fear. He’s heard that scream once before, back when his brother was just a child. It feels like ice water is dumped over him, pulling him out of reality. He knows he could lose control of the car and get hurt, but in that moment nothing matters more than the fact that North is in serious trouble.

Norawit slams the brakes. The car screeches, tires screaming as it fishtails violently. With trembling hands, he barely manages to keep control and comes to a stop just dozens of meters before the finish line. Seconds later, Nattawat blasts past him to the line, but Norawit is already shaking with rising panic.

“Norawit!”

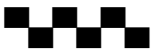
“What happened?! What’s wrong?!” he yells, his voice breaking as he grips the steering wheel.

“The old school building in Vermont Vista. I—”

The line cuts off. Female and male screams fill the call, thick with despair, followed by the sound of shattering glass. There’s chaos, panic, something terribly wrong.

“What the hell is going on?! North!”

“There are people here… there are so many people. We’re on fire. The building is on fire!”



Norawit couldn’t remember how he’d reached his destination at all. Buildings, streets, traffic lights, other cars — everything blurred past his eyes as shapeless, colorless stains. Just ten minutes ago, the world had been full of color. Now it had drained into black and white again, as if he’d been thrown years back into the past, to the exact moment when life split into before and after.

The only thing he could think about was North. His brother wasn’t answering his frantic calls, and with every unanswered ring, the anxiety in Norawit’s chest tightened further. His heart clenched painfully, though he still clung to hope. Still, the thought that it might already be too late was terrifying.

“We’re burning. The building is on fire.”

The words echoed in his head over and over again. North's voice had sounded so scared, and the moment Norawit heard it, everything else stopped mattering. North wasn't a coward. He took risks, sometimes recklessly so, often seeming to lack even a basic instinct for self-preservation. But whatever he'd seen had clearly plunged him into raw, animal terror.

Norawit had only heard his brother scream like that once before in his life. That time, he'd found him standing beside their parents' bodies.

Now it was happening again.

Which meant that whatever North had seen during that call had terrified him just as much.

Norawit parked abruptly near the building and felt everything inside him turn to ice the moment he looked up. This wasn't a small fire that could be quickly contained. The abandoned school was burning like a torch. Pieces of roofing and wall panels were scattered everywhere, shattered glass glittered across the ground, and the belongings of the injured lay strewn among the debris. It looked like a scene ripped straight out of a horror film.

His body began to shake violently with fear. Panic crushed his chest, stealing the air from his lungs. He tried to breathe, but something locked tight inside him, and only a thin, hoarse gasp escaped his throat. Now he understood why his brother had been so terrified, North had been at the center of this hell.

Two fire engines stood in the road, along with several ambulances and a single police car. Red emergency lights flashed everywhere, only feeding the rising panic. Uniformed responders rushed back and forth, helping the wounded and battling the fire, while bystanders stood behind black-and-yellow tape that cordoned off the site.

Some people were crying. Others were screaming. But shock and confusion were written on every face, and the reason was painfully clear. There were casualties.

Norawit swallowed hard, forcing down the sharp knot in his throat, and slowly stepped out of the car. The realization of what he was seeing made his hands tremble uncontrollably, and it took everything he had not to break down completely. His mind was already filling with the worst possible images — visions of his brother lying lifeless somewhere among the dead.

On the grass nearby, he saw black body bags. Too many of them. Far too many.

God.

With every second and every breath, the possibility that North wasn't answering because he couldn't grew heavier. Norawit ran a hand through his hair and, his knees shaking, started toward the bodies, only to be stopped by a police officer.

"You can't go there, sir," the man said gently.

"What happened?" Norawit forced out, staring at the flames.

"Looks like an electrical short circuit. That's the main theory for now. The investigation will continue."

“How many…” His voice broke as he gestured toward the bags. “How many are there?”

“Unfortunately, a lot. Firefighters pulled out ten people alive. They were trapped in the basement under the collapsed first floor of the left wing.”

“Under the rubble? In the basement?”

“Yes. The building’s old. The supports didn’t hold. Most people were evacuated, but not all. When the structure started collapsing, there were still people inside.”

Norawit stared at the bags, feeling like he was about to suffocate from sheer terror. If they’d been in the basement, then that was exactly where the fights usually took place.

The officer noticed Norawit’s condition and gently took hold of his elbow.

“Are you alright?”

“My brother,” Norawit whispered.

“Your brother was here?”

Norawit nodded slowly, barely managing to draw in air.

“Identification will take place later. Most died from smoke inhalation, but some will be difficult to identify. You’ll have to wait.”

“Were there any guys among the survivors or the deceased?” Norawit asked desperately, gripping the officer’s uniform. “We’re twins. Maybe you saw someone who looks like me. I need to know. Please. Tell me you saw him alive.”

“I’m sorry, but I wasn’t part of the rescue operation.”

“No. No, no, no,” Norawit muttered, shaking his head as despair swallowed him whole. “I have to know. I have to make sure he’s not there. He couldn’t have left me. He couldn’t have died!” he shouted, trying to break past the barrier.

The officer gently restrained him, guiding him aside. He rubbed Norawit’s back soothingly, like he would a frightened child, and sighed.

“Please, stay calm. Start by looking among the survivors. You haven’t done that yet, have you? He might be there, and you’re worrying for nothing. Those who didn’t need hospitalization are over there.” He pointed toward the far lawn. “Hope for the best, alright? If he’s not there, he may have been taken to the hospital. If he’s not on the injured list either, then come back to me.”

Norawit nodded slowly, unable to speak, and stumbled in the direction the man indicated. He walked almost blindly, bumping into people without even noticing. His mind had already painted the worst-case scenario in brutal detail — North’s body zipped inside one of those black bags.

God, he hated how paranoid he became when it came to his brother. But he couldn't stop it.

The boys and girls who had attended the fights were sitting or lying directly on the ground, wrapped in dark blue blankets. They had survived, but they looked terrified, as if even breathing felt dangerous. Some were crying. Others stared blankly ahead, trapped in deep shock. Someone here had likely just lost a friend. Or family.

It was monstrous.

Norawit's fear spiraled as he looked at them, and he hadn't even been inside the building. He couldn't imagine what they'd seen, what they'd felt when they realized they were burning alive. Slowly, he moved between them, scanning every face. With each unfamiliar one, his heart skipped painfully. The more people he saw, the weaker his hope became.

Many of them were familiar. Others he'd never seen before. But none of that mattered now. They were all feeling the same thing, and it crushed him from the inside.

Most of the spectators had been students, some still in high school. That meant the dead, the injured, the survivors — they were mostly between sixteen and twenty. Practically children. And they'd already seen death. Their lives would never be the same after this.

Then, finally, near one of the ambulances, Norawit spotted a painfully familiar profile. A black undercut. A shaved eyebrow. Lips just like his own.

North sat with his head bowed, holding an oxygen mask to his face. Every breath came with visible effort, like everyone else, he'd inhaled too much toxic smoke.

Alive.

A wave of pure relief rushes through Norawit from the crown of his head to the tips of his fingers, his heart kicking into a frantic, impossible rhythm. His legs carry him forward on instinct, and in just a few seconds he's already there. He drops to his knees in the grass in front of him, staring for a moment as if he needs to convince himself this is real, then finally lets out a shaky breath.

"North," he whispers, wrapping his arms tightly around him. "God."

North clings to him immediately, like a drowning man grasping a lifeline, and Norawit feels how badly he's shaking. He's alive. Thank God, he's alive, and that's the only thing that matters right now. The world fades away the moment he's holding the only family he has left, and for the first time he can breathe fully, pressing his nose into the soft hair at the crown of his brother's head. He hadn't dared hope he'd see him again.

"You scared the hell out of me, asshole," he mutters hoarsely. "Never do that again. Got it? I'll kill you myself if you pull something like this."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," North murmurs in a rough, broken voice, his eyes glassy with fear as he coughs harshly a few times. "For what I said to you back then. For everything. I'm sorry. I'm such a shitty brother. I don't deserve you."

“Stop it,” Norawit says sharply and presses a kiss to the top of his head. “I don’t want to hear anything like that.”

“But it’s true. We both know it. You’re the only reason I’m still alive and not rotting in prison. I know I cause you so many problems—”

“Calm down, runt,” Norawit interrupts firmly, sitting beside him and pulling him into a careful embrace. North rests his head on his shoulder and takes another deep breath from the small oxygen canister. “We’ll deal with it. Somehow. None of that matters right now. You’re in shock. But you’re okay, hear me? Everything’s okay.”

“I was so scared,” North whispers. “I thought it was the end. I really thought we were all going to die.”

“What happened inside? How did the fire start?”

“I don’t really know. I had a fight, and during the final round everything just… exploded into chaos. People started screaming, we smelled smoke, then the lights went out. That’s when we knew something was really wrong. Everyone rushed for the exits, trampling over anyone who fell and couldn’t get back up. The smoke made it impossible to see or breathe, and most people completely lost their sense of direction. Panic is a monstrous thing,” North says quietly, exhaling as the memories resurface.

“It’s over now,” Norawit says softly. “You survived. That’s what matters.”

His gaze drops to a long, deep gash on North’s arm, still bleeding heavily, and Norawit winces as if the pain were his own. He carefully removes the blood-soaked bandages left over from the fight.

“I survived,” North whispers, squeezing his eyes shut, “but my friends didn’t. I saw them choking to death. Some were just crushed by the crowd.”

“I know how that feels,” Norawit says quietly. “Facing death like that… it destroys something inside you. Especially someone like you. But please, don’t drown in it. If you start blaming yourself now, I don’t know how I’ll pull you back from that. Help me here. You need to stay strong.”

“I swear, I didn’t know,” North says hoarsely. “I never imagined something like this could happen.”

“Easy,” Norawit murmurs, gently rubbing his shoulder.

“I didn’t think a fire was even possible there. But I gathered everyone… I brought them all together.”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself,” Norawit says firmly. “Don’t take on responsibility that isn’t yours. This isn’t your fault.”

North exhales heavily and rubs his eyes, closing them. For a few minutes, he just sits there, soaking in the warmth of his brother’s body, slowly calming down. Norawit is a fragile beam

of light in his miserable life. Without him, God knows where he'd be now. He's the one who always takes his hand and leads him forward, who helps him through every hardship and tells him they're unstoppable together. North knows he's been a terrible younger brother, but he loves him with his whole heart and hopes, desperately, that Norawit knows that without needing to hear it out loud. More than anything, he wants to stop being a burden to him, but somehow everything he touches turns into a disaster. He'll never be able to repay him for everything he's done.

"North Titicharoenrak?" a police officer asks, approaching them with a folder in hand.

The brothers exchange confused glances and frown at the same time.

"That's me," North says, exhaling sharply as unease settles in his chest.

"Are you feeling okay? Do you still need medical assistance?"

"I'm fine."

"Alright. Then you'll need to come with us to the station."

"What?" Norawit asks, stunned.

"Why?" North says at the same time.

"We're launching an investigation. Until we clarify all the circumstances of tonight, you'll need to come with us."

"Why are you arresting him?" Norawit snaps, gripping his brother's wrist. "On what grounds?"

"This isn't an arrest," the officer replies calmly. "We need to question everyone involved to understand what happened. We know there were illegal fights taking place in the building, but no charges have been filed yet."

"Yet?" Norawit explodes. "My brother isn't guilty of anything. What fights? Are you seriously suggesting he started a fire he nearly died in himself?"

"That's exactly what we're trying to determine. If he's not at fault, Mr. Titicharoenrak will be released immediately. For now, we need to question him."

North blinks rapidly, realizing there's no way out of this. He's one of the organizers and a participant, everyone knows that, including the police. He's been detained before for fights and disorderly conduct. If he lies now, someone else will tell the truth anyway, and once the cops realize he lied, things will only get worse. His reputation is already garbage. It would look suspicious, and he has nothing to hide. All he can do is go and hope for the best. No one caught him red-handed, so maybe it won't be as bad as he fears.

He stands up obediently and throws Norawit an anxious glance.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he says, as if trying to convince himself more than his brother. “I swear. Everything will be fine.”

For a split second, panic flashes in his eyes, then resignation. For the first time, it seems he’s ready to take responsibility for everything that happened, because he blames himself. North follows the officer, and Norawit doesn’t take his eyes off his back until he disappears from view.

Why does he have such a terrible feeling about this? Like this is only the beginning of their problems. North isn’t just involved in illegal activity, he helped organize it. Damn it. That alone could land him behind bars. Norawit sinks down onto the grass and exhales deeply, closing his eyes. In his mind, he’s already searching for a lawyer, already figuring out how to get his brother out of jail. He’s paranoid, but experience has taught him to expect the worst. Every time things like this happen, they never end well.

The sounds of the fire slowly die down as it’s nearly extinguished, though faint crackling and the crunch of broken glass under firefighters’ boots still echo in the air. It seems everyone has been pulled out, and the number of body bags has doubled. God. How many people died?

Norawit buries his face in his hands, taking a few minutes to collect himself. Despite everything, what worries him most is North’s mental state, he’s seen death with his own eyes again. Too much death. Too many people he knew. That kind of thing can break someone.

Someone sits down beside him on the grass, and Norawit slowly turns his head. Nattawat is there, knees drawn up, arms resting on them. He adjusts his familiar black cap and looks over.

Nattawat meets his gaze with that same serious, understanding expression. No pointless questions. No empty words. Just a heavy sigh and a subtle nod of support. Blue and red lights from fire trucks and police cars flicker across his face, and Norawit watches them reflect in his eyes. He’s grateful beyond words that Nattawat is here. Out of everyone, he’s the one who knows how to support him exactly the way he needs.

“Four to three,” Nattawat says quietly, looking away.

Norawit raises an eyebrow.

“It was beautiful,” Nattawat adds, “but I won the race.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Norawit scoffs with a faint smile. “I’m already preparing my ass.”

“North?” Nattawat asks cautiously.

“Yeah,” Norawit exhales, running a hand through his hair. “He called me while we were racing.”

“I figured something went wrong. He’s not…”

“No. He’s alive.”

“Fuck. I thought the worst when you took off like that.”

“Trust me,” Norawit whispers, staring at his hands. “So did I. I thought he was dead.”

“But he’s not,” Nattawat says, squeezing his shoulder. “That’s what matters. Everything’s okay. Breathe.”

“Yeah. It’s just…” Norawit frowns and shakes his head. “Never mind. I was scared. Like always. That’ll probably never change.”

“It matters,” Nattawat says gently. “Never think your feelings don’t. They do. Talk to me. If you want to.”

“I’m not someone who shares what he feels.”

“It’s never too late to start. I know you don’t fully trust me, but I’m here. And whatever you say stays between us.”

“That’s not it.”

“Come on,” Nattawat smirks. “Cry on my shoulder, handsome. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Get lost,” Norawit chuckles.

“If you keep everything inside, one day you’ll run out of strength,” Nattawat says seriously. “You can break if you’re strong for too long. Share it with me.”

Norawit shakes his head and sighs.

“Alright. Didn’t work,” Nattawat murmurs after a pause. “Then I’ll tell you what I think you’re feeling.”

“What?” Norawit asks, confused.

“You were genuinely terrified. It knocked you off balance. You’re used to worrying about him, but not like this. I think this situation hit some deep, old wounds. You were really afraid this time, because you could’ve lost him forever. And I think you’re torn apart by contradictions. You love him, but you don’t feel that same love coming back. Does that bother you? Scare you? Confuse you? You probably ask yourself all the time: why am I trying so hard to earn his love? Why do I keep saving him? Why can’t he give back what I give him? Life would be easier. Why is he so weak against his vices? Why can’t he just stop? Is it really that hard to quit all that dirty shit and live normally? Right?”

Norawit slowly nods, resting his head against his hand. He lights a cigarette, thinking. He’s right, this shook him badly. Those questions haunt him, especially every time North gets into trouble again. Every day he wonders why North can’t just stop all this for him. What’s so hard about it? If you can’t do it alone, just accept help.

“The answer is simple, Norawit,” Nattawat continues gently. “You’re stronger than him. Something awful happened in your lives, and you took on the role of the one responsible

when no one else could. That was brave. And strong. But you can't protect him from everything. No one can. Not even from himself."

"Then who will save him if not me?" Norawit asks quietly, exhaling smoke. "He's my brother."

"Exactly. Your brother — not your son. He's not stupid or weak. North is grown. Sometimes, instead of carrying his responsibility, you need to step back. I'm not saying abandon him. But most of his problems, he's capable of solving himself. Yes, he'll make mistakes — but that's how we learn. If you always fix everything for him, does he ever learn anything? Honestly, I think most of his issues come from knowing you'll handle them. You have to rely on yourself, not wait for a miracle. If just once he really got burned and had to face it alone, maybe next time he'd think twice about whether his adventures are worth it."

Norawit lets out a quiet, surprised laugh. Damn it. He's right. North has never really dealt with his own problems. Since their parents died, Norawit handled everything — illnesses, trouble at school, the orphanage, the police, debts, addictions. He wrapped him in a cocoon, shielding him from the cruelty of the world. Maybe he did it wrong. Maybe he loved him too hard. But no one tells an eleven-year-old how to raise a deeply traumatized, depressed brother. He just loved him — and was terrified of him hurting even more.

"Where did you get so smart?" Norawit asks quietly, studying Nattawat's profile.

"I know how you feel," Nattawat says after a moment. "I carried responsibility for an adult woman who was supposed to be my mother. And how did that end? I found her dead on our bathroom floor. Too late, I realized that too much care can push people to do things out of spite. I begged her to stop drinking, poured out the alcohol — she bought more. I kicked men out of our house — she brought worse ones. I asked myself the same questions you're asking now. I loved her, no matter how badly she treated me. But I don't think she loved me the same way. It hurts to realize that. Maybe I loved her because she was all I had. I just wanted to feel that love, even when it hurt me."

Norawit takes a deep breath, his brows drawing together as a wave of regret washes over him, the kind that comes from knowing he can't undo the injustice this man has lived through. God. So this is what his soul has been hiding all this time. Cold, sharp, almost cruel on the outside, yet painfully gentle and fragile within. A deeply lonely person who has never truly known love, not even from his own mother. No one has ever loved him. That realization alone is terrifying. After all, she was the only person he had, the closest and dearest one in his life, and even she treated him with such chilling detachment.

"It's cruel," Norawit says quietly, "when you give someone your whole heart, do everything for them, and instead of gratitude or simple human warmth, all you get in return is another problem or a blunt 'go to hell.' And loving someone who doesn't love you back… that kind of pain cuts deep. It hits where it hurts the most."

"You're right. I used to think the same," Nattawat replies, exhaling slowly. "But when I ended up at my father's house, I realized there are things in this world that are much worse."

"Like what?" Norawit asks.

“Indifference. I have a father. A real one. And he genuinely doesn’t care whether I exist or not. That’s what’s truly disgusting. Though maybe it’s for the best,” he adds with a dry chuckle, shrugging. “He’s a monster. I wouldn’t want the kind of fate my brother had.”

He pauses, then continues more seriously. “North loves you. You should be grateful for that. I know sometimes it doesn’t feel like it, but maybe he just doesn’t know how to show it. He’s not like you. You express your feelings openly, through words and actions. For him, that’s hard. I get it. I’m not exactly warm myself. Maybe you’re just softer. Or maybe it comes easier to you. Maybe your parents never taught him how to give those feelings. Or maybe it’s just who he is. Trauma, personality, personal reasons. I don’t know him well, but if he truly didn’t care about you, your relationship would look very different. He’s pulling away now, and that scares the hell out of you.”

“You mean relationships like yours and Night’s?” Norawit asks carefully.

“Yeah. Like that. I know what complete indifference from a twin feels like. We started from nothing. When you’re fifteen and suddenly brought to your brother’s house, it’s strange. He looks exactly like you, but he’s a total stranger. I regret that we were never given the chance to build that bond. No matter how bad things are between parents, kids shouldn’t suffer for it. Ours didn’t see it that way.”

He lets out a quiet laugh, shaking his head. “My relationship with Night is far from perfect or close, and that’s partly my fault. I can’t say out loud that he matters to me. We know we’re brothers by blood, but saying ‘I love you’? Don’t make me laugh. I don’t even hope to hear that from him someday. But damn it… yeah, I do care about him. A lot. And I hope he cares about me too. That’s enough for me. He’s almost the only person in my life who shows, through actions, that I matter.”

“So this is your idea of a love confession?” Norawit chuckles softly. “It’s awful. You’d be better off staying quiet.”

“Shut up. That’s the only way I know how,” Nattawat mutters, nudging him and smiling faintly.

“So love, tenderness, that soft trembling feeling… none of that is familiar to you, is it?” Norawit asks, studying his kind eyes as he flicks away his cigarette. “No one’s ever given that to you.”

“I have no idea what that even is,” Nattawat shakes his head.

“To enjoy those things, you first have to learn how to accept them. It’s simple.”

“And how do you do that?”

“You open up. And you trust the person giving them to you.”

“I’m bad at that. Trusting people always comes at a cost,” Nattawat scoffs. “Every day of my life, I rely only on myself.”

“Not everyone is the same, Natt,” Norawit sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Some people are worth everything in this world. Someday, you’ll understand that.”

Nattawat scratches his eyebrow and smiles softly. Maybe he’s right. Maybe it’s worth thinking about. Maybe life would feel lighter then. It was a good conversation, despite the heavy topics. Serious, but strangely easy. For some reason, it feels calm to share things this personal with Norawit, even things about his mother, a part of his life he usually locks away and ignores. He’d only ever talked about her with Night, out of curiosity about the woman who gave them life.

It’s strange. Why does it feel so easy to open up to him? And stranger still, it actually feels lighter when he cracks that door open, just a little. Maybe it’s because they understand each other too well. They both carry ugly pasts and heavy years behind them, and Norawit’s words make him think. Maybe he should be gentler with his brother. Give him the chance to love him, if that’s what Night wants. He’s not any less broken, and in the end, they’re all they have. It turns out loving someone is hard, but letting yourself be loved is just as difficult.

“Thank you,” Norawit says quietly.

“Huh?” Nattawat raises a brow.

“Thank you for talking to me. For saying all of this. Maybe I really should stop hovering over him and let him take responsibility for his own choices.”

“And thank you,” Nattawat replies with a small smile. “Maybe I need to learn how to trust people. And be warmer with Night. He’s been trying for both of us.”

Norawit nods slowly, lost in thought, then exhales deeply.

“How did you even end up here?” he asks, turning to him. “Why?”

Nattawat gestures toward another ambulance parked nearby. Norawit follows his gaze. Sitting next to a doctor is a guy wrapped in the same blue blanket as the other victims. Dark black hair, and parts of his face are smeared with soot, and his brown eyes are filled with fear. He’s been in a fire. And it seems Nattawat came here because of him.

“Who is that?”

“My best friend,” Nattawat says, breathing out as if releasing all the worry he’d been holding in. “He called me too. I came here a few minutes after you.”

“Is he okay?”

“Smoke inhalation, but he’ll be fine.”

“Another adrenaline junkie if he was at the fights?”

“You won’t believe it, but today was his first time. And definitely his last,” Nattawat smirks. “He’s more into racing. A freelance artist. Works with me at the shop, sometimes does airbrush work for the Loop guys. That dragon on my car? His work.”

So that famous design on his car was done by his best friend. That's impressive. Norawit watches as the guy listens to the doctor, nodding along, then grabs a bottle of water and heads over when Nattawat waves him closer. Tall, lean, perfect posture. When he comes closer, Nattawat pulls him into a tight hug and visibly relaxes. Norawit smiles. He really had been worried all this time, even if he didn't show it.

"Norawit, this is Satang. Satang, this is Norawit," Nattawat says, gesturing between them.

"Norawit?" Tang blinks. "The same—"

"Quiet," Nattawat snaps, narrowing his eyes.

"The one and only?" Norawit laughs.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Nattawat groans. "It's nothing. Calm down, Romeo."

"What did he tell you about me?" Norawit asks, ignoring him and shaking Satang's hand with a shameless grin.

"That you kiss and dance insanely well. That you're easy to talk to and comfortable to sleep next to. And that you're a charming asshole," Tang says cheerfully.

"Natt," Norawit drawls, clearly pleased. "And you said nothing like that. You're obsessed with me, baby."

"We're leaving," Nattawat cuts in, shoving Tang toward the road. "I'll drive you home. You need rest. You must've hit your head. You're talking nonsense."

"Hey, I just met your sexual fantasy in real life," Tang laughs.

"He's not as charming today as usual. Come on," Nattawat insists.

They head toward the car, Tang still joking while Nattawat keeps pushing him forward, clearly trying to stop him from saying anything else. Norawit watches them with a smile before walking over to Phuwin's car. He gets in and exhales deeply, rubbing his face with his hands. Should he go to the station and find out what's going on, or not? What did Nattawat say? Give his brother the chance to take responsibility? Maybe stepping back is the right move. Or maybe this isn't one of those cases.

"Hey, sexy," Nattawat calls when his car stops nearby. "Since you lost, I'm waiting for you at the shop. I'll book you in. When works for you?"

"I'll call when I decide. Start sketching."

"Already did," he winks.

"Leave your number, baby, so I can call you," Norawit grins.

"Remember the license plate. You can run it or ask the cipher. Show some initiative," Nattawat says and speeds off.

0KHN418. Norawit memorizes it and lifts his hand out the window in a lazy wave. Easy enough. Nattawat glances at the rearview mirror and smiles to himself, already certain that this charming bastard will call or show up soon enough to claim his punishment.

The tattoo studio near the Pacific coast was one of the more well-known places in the city. Most of Nattawat's income came from here, from doing what he loved most. He was exceptionally good at drawing and could create designs to suit any taste. By reading a person's character and interests, he could easily come up with a unique image or line of text, then transfer it onto skin with precision and care. He had been doing this for years.

His first tattoo had appeared on his own body when he was fifteen. He had paid an older artist a little extra to look the other way about his age, and after that, everything spiraled quickly. He never wanted to leave this world again. Almost without noticing, his body filled with more and more ink, drawings and words claiming space on his skin. It really was a kind of addiction. Tattoos became his second great passion, right after racing.

He loved watching the satisfied expressions on his clients' faces when they saw the final result. Hours of meticulous work were always worth it if, in the end, the person wearing the new tattoo smiled. That smile was the best payment he could receive. He especially enjoyed working with people who came in with original ideas, doing his best to bring them to life in the most perfect way possible. He hated boring, meaningless designs. Tattoos meant something to him. Putting an image or words on your body that would later become a burden felt pointless.

Soft music played from an old cassette player he had brought into the studio years ago. He loved listening to old rock and pop tapes, and he still had an entire box of them from his youth. With the lights dimmed, Nattawat calmly cleaned up his workstation. The administrator and his partner, Tang, hadn't come in today after what happened at the fights. Nattawat was still worried about his health, so he'd promised to handle things alone for a few days. They only worked by appointment, so there were never any problems with walk-ins. The last client had been a tough one, and his arms still ached after tattooing a massive back piece on a bearded man in his forties.

Suddenly, the soft jingle of the bell on the front door rang through the studio, followed by the creak of the hinges. Nattawat frowned and glanced at the clock. They had been closed for a while now, and the sign on the door made that perfectly clear. Who the hell didn't bother to read it?

Soft footsteps echoed across the wooden floor, and he sighed in annoyance.

“We’re closed,” he called out, placing jars of ink back onto the shelf above his table.

A few seconds later, a pair of black boots appeared in his line of sight. Nattawat slowly lifted his gaze, taking in the visitor from the ground up. Long legs in tight jeans, a black T-shirt with a deep V-neck, and a familiar leather jacket. Norawit stood by the door, smiling charmingly as he ran a hand through his hair.

Damn it. Of course it was him.

“Make an exception for me, baby?” Norawit asked playfully.

“No exceptions. You don’t have an appointment, young man,” Nattawat replied with a smile, turning back to his paints.

“I was going to call ahead. I swear.”

“But?” Nattawat arched a brow.

“But work kept me busy all day. I only just got free.”

“Or you just couldn’t get my number, loser,” Nattawat laughed.

“I have your number. I saved you as ‘gas thief,’” Norawit said, stepping closer.

“How original.”

“Be a good boy and I’ll change it to ‘my boyfriend,’” Norawit whispered teasingly, fingers sliding into Nattawat’s dark hair.

“And what makes you think I want to be that?” Nattawat smirked.

“Don’t pretend you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, fine. You don’t need to be in a relationship to want each other. That arrangement works for me.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Gorgeous?”

“Ruined.”

Norawit laughed quietly.

“Are you mad? I just forgot to call. Sorry.”

“Your problem. Come back another time. It’s ten p.m. I’ve been closed for two hours.”

“But you’re still here,” Norawit said, gently kneading his shoulders. “Don’t grumble, baby.”

Nattawat closed his eyes and let out a long, helpless sound of pleasure. Damn it, that felt incredible. A massage at the end of the day was exactly what he needed. For a few minutes, he let himself melt under the careful but confident hands before sighing contentedly.

“You purr just like Jumu when I pet him,” Norawit chuckled.

“Don’t compare me to that evil creature.”

“Evil? He’s the most adorable ball of fluff in the world.”

“Not with me.”

“He just doesn’t like strangers. And he’s jealous. He’ll get used to you if you stay over more often.”

“Is that an offer?”

“Maybe,” Norawit whispered near his ear, pressing a soft kiss behind it. “I wouldn’t mind. Would you?”

“Damn,” Nattawat murmured as goosebumps spread across his skin. “That’s not fair. You can’t force answers out of me using dirty tricks. Don’t do that again.”

“Like this?” Norawit laughed softly and kissed the same spot.

“Yes,” Nattawat smiled, shrugging his shoulder.

“Or like this?” Norawit whispered, kissing the back of his neck.

“Stop. Those are erogenous zones. You’re playing with fire.”

“Maybe this is forbidden too?” Norawit asked innocently, kissing the hollow where his neck met his shoulder.

“God, stop,” Nattawat groaned. “I’ve got goosebumps everywhere.”

“You’re so sensitive, Natt. What do you think will happen if I go lower?” Norawit murmured, hands sliding over his chest, pulling him into an embrace.

“Stop seducing me, Norawit.”

“But you want it.”

“Are you suggesting we do this here?”

“Ever had sex at work?” Norawit whispered against his ear with a grin.

“No.”

“What, are you a eunuch?” Norawit laughed. “Not drunk, not at work. Don’t tell me you’re a virgin.”

“Do I look like one?” Nattawat raised an eyebrow.

“Even if you were, I’d be your first. You wouldn’t resist. I’m too sexy.”

“Self-absorbed idiot.”

“Listen,” Norawit drawled thoughtfully. “If I’m really not interesting to you, why am I wasting my time? Maybe I’ll get to know your brother better. He’s handsome. And he was checking me out when I was dancing. We’d get along.”

Nattawat huffed and grabbed Norawit’s hands, pulling them forward. Norawit laughed and wrapped his arms around him more tightly. The soft, velvety sound filled the room and settled deep in Nattawat’s chest, making something inside him tremble.

“Hi, Mister ‘I’m not jealous,’” Norawit murmured, burying his nose in Nattawat’s hair. “You smell like blooming cherry trees. It’s insane. When we visited my grandmother in Japan, my brother and I used to sit under the cherry trees every evening. They smelled just like this when they bloomed. I loved those flowers.”

“It’s just shampoo.”

“Floral shampoo?” Norawit blinked. “What are you, five?”

“Leave me alone. I’m sensitive to smells, so I like surrounding myself with nice ones,” Nattawat smiled, stroking the soft skin of his wrists.

“Lucky you. I use fruity shower gel that scrubs engine oil off my skin.”

“And why should I care?”

“So you can enjoy the scent of my skin while I’m busy with your body,” Norawit whispered.

“I thought you said you don’t sleep with guys like me,” Nattawat smirked.

“I decided to make an exception.”

“Why?”

“You’ve got a great ass.”

“Solid argument,” Nattawat said, turning his head. “So why did you really come?”

Norawit leaned in and kissed him. Slow, intoxicating, impossibly hot. He teased his lips gently, holding his chin with warm fingers. In just a few seconds, that familiar, overwhelming fire flared between them again, just like the first time they met. Their breathing quickened, and Norawit smiled into the kiss before reluctantly pulling away, brushing his nose against Nattawat’s cheek.

“And how am I supposed to take that?” Nattawat asked.

“However you want,” Norawit smiled, licking his lips. “But actually, I came for my well-deserved punishment.”

“Oh right. The ass tattoo,” Nattawat laughed.

“You said the design was ready. Show me. I’m mentally prepared for anything.”

Nattawat grabbed his sketchbook and flipped to the right page. Norawit sat on the couch beside him, looking around the studio. The place had atmosphere. Dark wallpaper, black furniture, top-tier equipment, and music that fit the energy perfectly. One wall held a mesmerizing graphic piece, while the other displayed rows of small wooden frames with beautiful sketches inside. This was where Nattawat spent his time, doing something he truly loved. It felt cozy. If Norawit ever decided to get another tattoo, he’d come back here.

“This one,” Nattawat said, showing him the page. “I think it suits you. Matches your hair.”

He bit his lip, barely holding back laughter at the look of pure shock and doom on Norawit’s face. On the page was a cute little kitten, white, wearing a light brown dress. Definitely a tattoo meant for some tiny woman with a purse dog. And he was supposed to get this on his ass?

Norawit dragged his hands down his face and groaned.

“Holy hell. I need a drink. I’ll tell everyone I did this drunk.”

Nattawat laughed and began setting up his equipment, pulling out ink, transfer paper, needles, and disinfectant.

“You haven’t been drinking today?” he asked.

“No.”

“Since this isn’t your first tattoo, I won’t explain the pain. It’ll hurt a little.”

“Does it even hurt on the ass? It’s all muscle,” Norawit frowned, thinking seriously.

Nattawat laughed again and kept preparing.

“When did you get your first tattoo?” Norawit asked, examining his body.

“Fifteen. Almost sixteen. Birthday gift to myself.”

“That’s illegal,” Norawit raised a brow suspiciously.

“Nope,” Nattawat smirked.

“You’ve been breaking the law for a long time. Amazing. My future boyfriend is a criminal,” Norawit grinned.

“Terrifying, right?”

“And which one was first?”

Nattawat pointed to a cosmos flower with text on his chest. Norawit lifted his shirt gently, tracing the black ink with his thumb.

“Beautiful. ‘Please, love me?’” he read softly.

“Don’t laugh.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“The cosmos is my birth flower. That’s what it means. Love was something I always lacked. So it fit.”

“There will be someone who drowns you in love for all those who never gave it to you,” Norawit said quietly, lifting his gaze.

Something tightened unexpectedly in Nattawat’s chest. The words were simple, but they mattered. Hearing them from Norawit felt strange and unsettling in the best way. He turned away, cheeks warming.

“I hope so,” he said, adjusting the light.

“Do I need to take my pants off completely?” Norawit grimaced.

Nattawat laughed, checking the machine.

“Take off your shirt and lie on your back.”

“My shirt?”

“I chose a different spot.”

“A cat on my chest? Even better. Branded for life,” Norawit sighed as he undressed.

“I was messing with you. It’ll be a different design.”

“What kind?”

“I’ll tattoo you blind.”

“I don’t like that idea.”

“Trust my taste.”

“Big?”

“Pretty.”

“Color?”

“Black.”

“Image?”

“Words.”

“Damn,” Norawit muttered, lying down. “Now I’ll be nervous.”

“No cats. It’ll be beautiful.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“And I’m supposed to trust the guy who tried to rob me and wanted to tattoo a cat on my ass?”

“Yes,” Nattawat shrugged.

“Alright, Natt. I hope I don’t regret this.”

“No peeking.”

He pulled on black gloves, disinfected Norawit’s ribs, and transferred the sketch. Focused, thoughtful, professional. Norawit watched him work, feeling the careful warmth of his hands.

“You have such gentle hands,” Norawit said. “Are you always this tender?”

“Shut up,” Nattawat smirked.

“Are you painting the Sistine Chapel over there?”

“Almost ready.”

Moments later, the machine buzzed to life. Norawit endured the sting calmly. It wasn’t his first tattoo, but the ribs were sharper, more intense. Especially when Nattawat went over the same lines again. The pain was tolerable, but real. Goosebumps rose, less from the needle than from the way Nattawat’s fingers brushed his skin.

“Natt,” Norawit said, watching him.

“Mm?”

“You realize you’ll have to marry me after this.”

“Why’s that?” Nattawat laughed.

“I trusted you blindly with my body. That’s basically giving you my virginity.”

“To marry someone, you have to trust more than that.”

“My heart?” Norawit raised a brow.

“Your soul.”

They talked about love, trust, honesty, chemistry, and what makes something real. Norawit listened, stunned by the depth of a man who had never seen a happy family but still believed in something pure.

When Nattawat said, “Love is born from trust,” something inside Norawit stirred.

This man was rare. A diamond in a sea of rot. Someone who still believed.

And that was terrifying.

“Look at that, there’s chemistry between us. Mutual understanding, too. Does that mean we’re already on step two toward a happily ever after?” Norawit chuckles softly.

“Don’t laugh. You’re twitching,” Nattawat says sternly, though a smile still slips onto his lips. “You’ll ruin my work.”

Then he adds, more thoughtfully, “Just because we want each other doesn’t mean we’ll have perfect chemistry. We might be disappointed once we actually sleep together.”

“True. What if you’ve got a dick the size of a pinky finger? I’d be devastated,” Norawit says dryly. “My heart would be shattered. In my fantasies, you’re flawless in every possible way.”

“Idiot,” Nattawat laughs, shaking his head, and Norawit can’t help laughing too.

He takes a deep breath, steadying himself, while Nattawat shades in the letters with light, precise movements. This part hurts more, in some places, a lot more. Norawit clenches his teeth and endures it, watching him work.

Nattawat is meticulous, almost reverent in his focus. Is there anything he isn’t good at? Everything seems to come effortlessly to him. He gently wipes away the blood when it wells up, giving Norawit a few seconds to rest whenever the pain becomes too intense.

He’s a good artist. And at some point, Norawit realizes he’s stopped worrying entirely about the outcome. He’s sure it’s going to be something incredible.

“But seriously,” Norawit says quietly, staring up at the ceiling, “do I actually have any qualities from your ‘required list’?”

“No,” Nattawat answers without hesitation.

“No?” Norawit echoes, surprised.

“You’re too bold. Too self-confident. Sharp, straightforward. Sometimes you act like a complete idiot.”

“And those are supposed to be flaws? No one’s without sin.”

“You take reckless risks. And you drink. I can tolerate a lot, but not alcoholism.”

“I’m not an alcoholic,” Norawit mutters, frowning as he looks at him.

“I know,” Nattawat replies gently. “But you need to stop calming your nerves this way. Otherwise, you’ll end up like my mother.”

“As if I don’t know how messed up that is,” Norawit sighs hopelessly.

“I’m not lecturing you. I don’t have the right — not with my own issues. I just…”

“What issues?” Norawit cuts in, lifting a brow with interest.

“It doesn’t matter,” Nattawat waves it off.

“No. It does matter if you call them problems. Tell me. I want to know you.”

Nattawat exhales tensely, continuing to work in silence. He isn’t used to sharing his worries or feelings with anyone. But Norawit was brave enough to point out his drinking — openly, honestly. So why couldn’t he do the same?

Norawit draws people in with his sincerity, with how easily he talks about his flaws. He isn’t like this with everyone. And Nattawat finds that he likes how unashamed Norawit is of his weaknesses — how he accepts them and fights them in whatever way he can. The first and most important step is talking about them. Admitting weakness is its own kind of strength.

“I’m a gambler,” Nattawat finally says quietly. “Poker, especially.”

After a pause, he adds, “I’m trying not to play at all now. But when there’s temptation — a big win — I give in. I can’t seem to shake it.”

“So that’s your sin,” Norawit murmurs thoughtfully, frowning. “You’re a gambler.”

“Yeah,” Nattawat nods. “I wouldn’t say I’m completely addicted. I don’t bet my last cent or sell my things to play…”

He hesitates, then exhales sharply. “But medically speaking, it probably is an addiction. Once I’m in the game, I lose control. You were right — my brakes don’t always work. And that’s dangerous. Worse than alcohol or drugs, actually. It’s not physical. It’s in your head.”

“Did you win much?”

“I did. A lot. And I lost just as easily, ending up broke. I got into serious trouble playing on credit.”

“You really are reckless, Natt.”

“I’m trying to fight it,” Nattawat says. “I want racing to be my only adrenaline fix.”

He pauses. “But it’s not easy.”

“That’s why you drive like you’re possessed,” Norawit says slowly. “Is that why you raced in Osaka? You didn’t want the prize — you wanted the win. The competition. The fight.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I ended up putting the prize money into poker anyway. It meant nothing to me.”

“And? Did you win?”

“I wish,” Nattawat says with a sad smile.

So this is who Nattawat really is — someone no one truly knows. An unbeatable racer and a reckless gambler, with a soul scarred by people who were supposed to love him. A secret he’d been afraid to share with anyone — until now.

“Damn,” Norawit exhales.

“Yeah. It’s bad.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Norawit smirks, glancing at him and arching a brow playfully. “You were honest with me. That means we’re officially on step three toward a happily ever after.”

“Oh my God, shut up,” Nattawat laughs. “I’m pouring my soul out here.”

“And I’m thinking about our future,” Norawit replies, laughing too.

They spend the rest of the time in silence while Nattawat finishes his work.

Norawit watches him, knowing how hard it was for him to open up. That step alone was enormous — and obvious. Maybe he’d never trusted anyone with that secret before.

They were both unbearably lonely people. Maybe that was why they found escape in dangerous races and destructive addictions — like they had nothing left to lose. And in truth, they didn’t. Except their lives. And neither of them valued those very much. No one had fought for them. No one had tried to save them. Sometimes it felt like if they simply disappeared, no one would even notice.

“That’s it,” Nattawat says at last, satisfied, wiping the finished work clean.

“Can I look now?”

“Yeah. Nervous?” he smiles.

“No. Strangely enough. I’m sure it’s beautiful.”

Norawit stands, rolls out his stiff shoulders and neck, then walks to the mirror. A quiet breath of surprised — pleasant — awe leaves him. Nattawat hadn’t lied. It looks incredible.

Across his right ribs, in a cursive, sweeping script, is the word “Chang Maeng”. It’s still red and slightly swollen, far from healed, but he already loves it. Once it settles, it’s going to look

unreal. The font, the style, the word itself and everything it means — it's a perfect hit. How the hell did he get it so right?

"Well?" Nattawat asks cautiously.

"I like it," Norawit says, touching it lightly with his fingertips, smiling.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's badass."

"I'm glad I got it right. It felt like your style."

"But why this?"

Nattawat shrugs, setting the machine aside.

"You're the kind of person who stands their ground and moves toward their goal no matter what. You're strong. Hard to break. I don't know you that well yet, but I already admire that about you. You don't care what people think — and that commands respect. Most of us depend on the crowd. You don't. You live by your own rules, follow the impulses of your soul. You mess up, live day to day, fall, get back up, learn, and move forward instead of drowning in your failures."

He smiles when he sees Norawit's face light up.

"I honestly thought you'd be furious about losing the race to me. You're the best of the best. I figured it would hit your ego. But no — you don't care what anyone says. You're your own authority. And I really like that about you."

"Wow," Norawit whispers, lifting his brows in awe. "Okay. That's definitely a four-four. I've got nothing to say to that. You win."

"I think it suits you better than anything else."

"It's the best thing I could've put on my body," Norawit says with a smile. "Thank you, Natt. I don't regret trusting you for a second. It was worth it."

Chapter 4: IV

The police station Norawit had come to know over the past few years almost as well as his own home was overflowing today. After everything that had happened, it was packed with people. Relatives and friends of those detained for questioning crowded the waiting area and hallways. Others sat in silence, grieving the dead, waiting for any news about identifications. Officers in uniform rushed from one office to another, answering the same questions over and over in dry, practiced voices, completely absorbed in their work. Papers changed hands nonstop, and they fended off persistent inquiries with the same stock phrases: We're looking into it. We're working on it. Information will come later. Please wait.

North hadn't been released even after a full day, and his brother finally couldn't take it anymore. He came to find out what was really going on and why North was being held for so long. Standing aside wasn't an option anymore. He had honestly tried, following Nattawat's advice, to step back and let him handle his own problems, but this wasn't a situation where you could just sit and do nothing. The feeling in his gut was awful.

Knowing the full story, Norawit understood that, at best, his younger brother was facing probation or a short arrest for organizing underground fights. At worst, they could pin everything that happened on him and turn him into a convenient scapegoat. And how could Norawit allow that? He had to try to fight back, at least a little.

He walks slowly toward the glass information desk, casting cautious glances around. Sitting there is a cop he knows well, an older man with a beard named Earl. A former soldier retired for health reasons, Earl had worked here for about twenty years and usually knew everything and everyone almost firsthand. He was easy to talk to and could be persuaded to share important information.

Norawit approaches and waits patiently while Earl finishes talking to an elderly woman. She drones on for a long time about her missing cat, and he politely explains that it isn't their jurisdiction. When she finally leaves, the officer waves a hand and exhales in relief.

"Next. I'm listening."

"Hey, old man Earl," Norawit says with a friendly smile.

"Oh, I was expecting you right after the incident," Earl chuckles mockingly, shifting documents from one corner of his desk to the other. "Good to see you, son. I saw your brother yesterday. You're late this time."

"Yeah. Got a bit busy," Norawit replies, leaning closer to the counter. "Listen, you know where he is right now, don't you?"

"Of course I do. But there's nothing I can do. They won't let you see him this time. Just look at this place. I'd help you if I could, but not today."

“So there are no options at all?”

“Sorry, Norawit. I can’t help.”

“Damn it,” he exhales, annoyed. “Can you at least tell me why they’re holding him so long? Are they charging him with something serious? Everyone else was released ages ago.”

“I don’t know,” Earl replies thoughtfully, scribbling something in a logbook. “They don’t keep me in the loop on cases like that.”

Norawit runs a hand through his hair, scanning the room, nervously biting the inside of his cheek. Of course, Earl knows more than he’s saying. This answer is familiar, and Norawit knows exactly how to handle situations like this. They already have an established arrangement and a price for small favors.

He slips a green bill from his pocket and discreetly slides it under a folder on the desk.

“Maybe you do know something,” he murmurs quietly, making sure no one’s nearby. “Anything at all. I need whatever you’ve got.”

Earl studies him with a suspicious squint, amber eyes narrowing, then shakes his head with a faint smile. When he smiles, deep wrinkles spread across his kind face, marks of age and experience.

“Norawit Titicharoenrak, one day you’re going to get me fired. I’m a pensioner, have mercy. I love this job.”

“Oh, come on. Fired for what?” Norawit smiles innocently. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Alright,” Earl sighs, lowering his voice. “I’ll tell you what I’ve managed to learn. Things are bad. The higher-ups are terrified. This isn’t something that can just be swept under the rug. About twenty people are dead, and nearly twice that number were injured. This isn’t a minor incident you can ignore. You get it, right?”

“Unfortunately,” Norawit frowns, resting his head against his palm. “My brother’s screwed, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know for sure. But they questioned him for a long time yesterday. Deep into the night. Longer than anyone else. They didn’t even let him out of the interrogation room to rest. Most likely, they’ll make him responsible for the whole nightmare. He already has a record for racing, disorderly conduct, all that. They dug up that old assault case too. His reputation isn’t great, and that’s going to work against him. You know how they look at things like that.”

“But he didn’t start the fire,” Norawit snaps. “They’re just going to blame him because there’s no one else? Because his reputation is questionable? How is that fair, Earl? Where the hell is justice in this world?”

The man sighs heavily, looking at him with genuine regret.

“Someone has to take responsibility. If not the owner of the place, then the organizer of the fights. Officially, the building belongs to some nobody connected to Lim’s people. But we all know who really owns it. And considering who Damian is…”

Damian. The same man North had spoken to in the parking lot. Damn it. Of course. His brother had mentioned that Damian provided the building for the fights. So this moneybag was a pretty big deal in the city?

“And who exactly is he?” Norawit asks.

“Damian Lim? You don’t know?” Earl looks surprised. Norawit shakes his head. “A genius, an inventor, and the owner of a major industrial company here, Lim Industries. A man with endless connections, which is why he does whatever he wants. The cops know it. But those connections…” Earl shakes his head. “My God. Everyone knows he’s a spoiled bastard, but he always gets away with everything. Clean in the eyes of the law, even when all the evidence seems stacked against him. I doubt he’ll take responsibility for what happened.”

“Fuck. That’s the last thing I needed,” Norawit mutters, dragging a hand through his hair. “I didn’t realize it was the owner of Lim Industries.”

“Your brother got mixed up in something, didn’t he?” Earl asks quietly. “And this time it’s really bad.”

“He has some kind of business with him. I saw them together. I didn’t like it even then. I don’t know what’s going on, but North clearly isn’t on good terms with him. Do you have anything on Lim?”

“Nothing useful,” Earl shakes his head. “Clean as morning dew. All his official operations are completely legal. Offices, laboratories, the whole picture. What he really does there, no one knows for sure. At least in my circles, it’s all speculation. He’s insanely smart, and his tech developments bring in massive profits, judging by how he lives. Tons of investors, rich friends. But I’d bet drugs or weapons play a big role. Maybe manufacturing, maybe distribution. You don’t rise like that out of nowhere. There were even rumors he works with Iranian terrorists.”

“Jesus Christ,” Norawit whispers. “What a character.”

“Yeah.”

“Alright,” Norawit says after a pause. “And about my personal request?” he asks hopefully.

Earl nods briefly, rummages through a few folders, then pulls out a small piece of paper no bigger than a business card and hands it to him.

“Here. That’s all I managed to find. I doubt I can do more for you, Norawit. You know this case isn’t really being worked anymore. It’s a dead end. No leads.”

Norawit reads the name and address written in the old man’s shaky handwriting and frowns. That’s it? Almost a month of waiting for this? It wasn’t much, but it was something. He had

hoped for more information about his parents' death, but even this was better than nothing. At least now he had a starting point. The first real lead he'd had in years.

"Who is this?" he asks, slipping the paper into his back pocket. "From what I understand, this person knows something about what happened that night, but the cops couldn't get anything out of him. There was a theory that he might know the people who carried it out."

"Maybe he doesn't know anything at all?"

"They can't act roughly or illegally, but—"

"I'm not them," Norawit cuts in with a crooked smile, nodding in agreement. "You know me too well, old man."

"Yes. I know how determined you are, and you usually get what you want," Earl says cautiously, genuine concern in his voice. "Maybe you really can get more out of him. Just—no criminal shit, alright? It's not worth it. No truth is worth your life. You still have a future. Be careful if you don't want to end up in prison or… next to your parents. You don't know why they did what they did to them. Think first. Act later."

Suddenly, Earl stiffens, straightening as if pulled by a string. He glances somewhere over Norawit's shoulder and abruptly drops the subject, lowering his eyes.

"There's nothing I can help you with," he says loudly, shuffling the papers on his desk.

"Norawit?" his brother's voice comes from behind him. "How long have you been here?"

So that's why he stopped. Earl knows how painful the subject of their parents' death is for North. He never involves the younger brother in it, though he still hopes to find answers himself.

North steps up quickly and wraps his arms around him. The moment North sees that familiar face, the light brown hair, and catches the scent he knows so well, something inside him finally loosens. He exhales, relief washing over him, and feels his brother hug him back.

He's home.
Those forty-eight hours felt like an eternity, but right now, at least for a moment, he can breathe.

Norawit gently pulls back, brushes the dark hair from North's forehead, and studies his face carefully. Alive. Unharmed. Just utterly exhausted. Dark crescents sit beneath his eyes, and the dull, pained look in them says more than words ever could. His injured arm is bandaged, but his complexion is far from healthy. He desperately needs rest after everything he's been through.

And since he's walking around the station freely, without handcuffs, that means he was released. They're going home.

But why?
Just like that?

“Hey, brat,” Norawit says with a smile.

“Shut up. You’re only seven minutes older,” North scoffs, though he smiles back.

“And I’ll remind you of that for the rest of your life. They let you go?” Norawit asks, surprised.

“Yeah. Everything’s fine. No charges. It’s all settled.”

“All settled?” Norawit frowns. “What does that even mean? Who’s taking the fall, then? Someone has to be held responsible. Damian? Your friend?”

North shoots him a sharp, almost frightened look, then softens immediately and exhales deeply.

“What?” Norawit presses.

“Nothing. I don’t know who’ll be responsible,” North mutters, waving it off and dropping his gaze. “It doesn’t really matter. I gave my statement and they let me go. That’s all. Isn’t it more important that I’m free? Let’s go home.”

“People died, Northie. That matters,” Norawit says quietly. “You were there. They could’ve locked you up, and instead they just let you walk? Are you sure this is really okay? I don’t like this. It’s too suspicious.”

“They let me go,” North repeats, rubbing his wrists. “Please, stop digging into this. These are my problems. Just be glad I’m not behind bars.”

Norawit blinks at him, stunned. This is the first time in his life he’s heard that tone from his brother. Refusing his help. What the hell?

“But—”

“Please. Stop. I’ll deal with it myself,” North says firmly. “I don’t want you worrying about this too.”

“And they’re not charging you with the illegal fights either?”

“No.”

“I don’t get it,” Norawit says slowly, suspicion creeping in. “You’re hiding something.”

“I’m just starving and I need a shower. I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck,” North snaps irritably, then pats his shoulder, trying to soften it. “Norawit, I’m exhausted. That’s all. Let’s go home. You’re getting paranoid again. If things were really bad, I’d be sitting here in handcuffs.”

He exhales shakily, gives him a strained, painful smile, and heads for the exit.

Norawit watches him go, brows knitting together in confusion.
What the hell is going on with him? Why is he in such a hurry to leave? It feels like he's trying to run away — but from what? Or from whom?

Maybe things aren't as clean as he claims. He's acting far too suspicious. Norawit knows him too well not to notice.

Or maybe he's right. Maybe it's just stress. Maybe this is paranoia.

Still, deep down, that familiar, unpleasant feeling settles in his chest — the one that always appears when North is in deep trouble and digging himself even deeper.

Secrets again.
Those strange looks again.
That silence about what's really going on in his life.

Norawit isn't stupid or naïve enough to believe this so easily. And if his brother won't talk on his own, then he'll have to handle this situation differently.

Norawit presses the doorbell of the familiar apartment again and again, four blocks away from his own place, his finger stubbornly returning to the button. Inside, there is nothing. No sound at all. It's far too quiet for North. Usually music is blasting, or there are voices, laughter, someone always around.

He came to check on his younger brother because the sense of dread hasn't left him for a single second, not even after several days.

Norawit exhales deeply, then reaches for the spare key hidden between the doorframe and the wall. He unlocks the door and steps inside, greeted by complete darkness and a ringing silence. He turns on the light and slowly walks down the hallway, taking everything in. The air smells stale, as if the windows are never opened, and the place is a complete mess. Clothes lie everywhere in shapeless piles, dirty dishes are stacked high on the table and overflowing in the sink. As always. He never learned to clean up after himself.

Norawit comes here often, but usually for one reason only: to pull his brother out of a near-comatose state after drugs or alcohol.

He sits down on the couch in the living room and frowns when he notices the empty bottles scattered across the floor and faint traces of cocaine left on the table. Perfect. So he's used again. Recently, too. Even if it doesn't happen as often as before, it's been happening more and more lately. And that terrifies him.

North lived through the worst day of his life. He saw his friends die. And apparently that was enough to push him back into this shit. That's exactly what Norawit feared most. Years ago, his younger brother started with light drugs. At first it seemed harmless, almost trivial. He smoked sometimes, relaxed with friends, nothing serious. But it escalated.

He got addicted to the feeling, to the moment when his consciousness drifted away and real life stopped hurting for a while. Over the years, that wasn't enough anymore. He wanted the feeling to last longer. Pills followed. And now, cocaine.

Sure, Sigmund Freud once promoted cocaine as a treatment for depression. The problem was that he himself was addicted. North needed to learn how to fight his demons in different ways before he moved on to something even worse. Norawit hated these kinds of escapes. He knew the euphoria from coke was short-lived and colorful, while the drug itself slowly and relentlessly destroyed the body.

Yes, at first there's a rush. Pain dulls, energy spikes. But then the sweetness fades, and the suffering begins. Was it worth it? No. Never. Depression comes crashing back, anxiety grows, and soon the withdrawal hits like a truck.

North is destroying himself, and it hurts Norawit to watch. He's digging his own grave deeper and deeper. And while the physical addiction isn't at its worst yet, something has to be done. Sitting back and doing nothing will kill him sooner or later.

Norawit dials his number, hoping to find out where he is. The long ringing echoes in his head as his gaze drifts to an old photograph on the shelf. A soft smile touches his lips. It's them as kids. So long ago it almost feels like another life entirely.

They're ten years old in the picture, unaware of what lies ahead. Happy. Smiling. Still untouched by the cruelty of reality. They're standing by the Pacific Ocean, waves crashing into their backs as they laugh and cling to each other. Their mother took the photo. Their father was laughing too, sitting in the sand.

Norawit would give anything to see them again.

"What do you want, Norawit?" North's slightly irritated voice sounds in his ear.

"And that's how happy you are to hear me?" Norawit asks with a sad chuckle.

"Sorry. I'm a bit busy. Is it urgent?"

"Unlike you, I don't only call my brother when I need something."

"Very funny. I really am busy though. I'll call you back later, yeah?"

"Where are you right now?"

“At home.”

A blatant lie. His heart was already pounding from a bad feeling, and now it only gets worse. Something is wrong. Norawit knows it.

“Alone?” he asks, pretending he doesn’t know.

“For now. I might invite some friends over.”

“Racing tonight? Fighting?”

“No. Not in the mood. I’m not in shape anyway. We’ll just hang out. I want to finally play console with Cipher, I haven’t taken his money in a while.”

Another lie. Norawit knows there’s a fight tonight. The date is circled on the wall calendar, marked with a letter, the way North always does when he’s issued a challenge or accepted one.

Norawit runs a hand through his hair and stays silent for a few seconds. The lies are suffocating. Why has he started lying so much? They used to be honest with each other. Completely. And now everything has changed.

“Did you use anything today?” Norawit asks quietly, staring at the table.

“No,” North snaps. “Are you going to keep asking me that? I can control myself. Relax.”

Another lie. And it hurts. It hurts that he lies so easily. Something tightens painfully in Norawit’s chest as he realizes his brother no longer trusts him. Their bond is cracking day by day, and if this continues, they’ll become strangers. The thought makes him furious.

“No,” Norawit whispers, covering his eyes with his hand. “It’s nothing. Forget it.”

“Hey… are you okay?” North suddenly asks, concern slipping into his voice. “I don’t like how you sound.”

“I’m worried about you,” Norawit says quietly. “I just want you to be okay.”

“I am. Turn off your inner paranoiac and go have fun too. You’ve got company anyway. That handsome Nattawat is keeping you busy, right? I’ll call you later.”

“Okay,” Norawit replies, exhaling heavily. “I love you. You know that.”

“Yeah,” his brother answers before hanging up.

Norawit scoffs softly, rolls his eyes, and shakes his head. That’s always his answer. He’s used to it, but every time he still hopes to hear something else. Pathetic, maybe. But he needs those words from him.

North is all the family he has left. And now he understands why Nattawat once desperately wanted his mother’s love, even though she treated him with such indifference.

The frightened boy Norawit saw clinging to him outside the burning school is gone. His usual brother is back, pretending his life isn't falling apart. His voice, his words, his gaze, all of it felt wrong from the moment he asked Norawit not to interfere.

If he's lying so easily, then he's either already found trouble or is actively looking for it. And the way the fire was handled so quickly doesn't sit right with Norawit at all. Something is wrong. And it's not paranoia. He's sure of it. Things don't resolve this smoothly when the situation is this serious.

A few minutes later, Norawit dials another number. Pahn answers almost immediately, her voice sleepy, rough and soft at the same time. It makes him smile.

"Hey, chocolate marshmallow."

Norawit laughs quietly, rubbing his face as he heads for the door.

"Hey, beautiful," he says, pulling on his jacket. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"No, I was just about to fall asleep. Miss me?"

"Obviously."

"I missed you too. So, tell me honestly, what do you need?"

"I need your help."

"Well, I'm in. What kind of mess are we dealing with?" she asks, rustling in bed.

"You said once you could track North's phone if needed."

"I can."

"I need it."

"Do you want his full route or just his current location?"

"Location."

"Even easier. Hold on."

"God, smart women are so sexy," Norawit laughs.

"And smart and beautiful women like me are a danger zone for your heart."

"I've loved you for a long time. You know that."

"You drive me crazy sometimes, but I love you too. Did North screw up again?"

"I hope not."

"That doesn't sound optimistic."

“With my brother, optimism doesn’t exist,” Norawit says with a weak smile.

He steps outside and mounts his motorcycle, waiting. He looks up at the black sky scattered with countless tiny lights. Millions of stars, all different, all shining. The distant sound of the ocean reaches him. He closes his eyes, breathing in the salty air as the wind brushes his skin. The city sleeps, and a rare, gentle calm settles in.

“Found him,” Pahn says. “Industrial zone, outskirts of the city. Looks like private property.”

“Thanks, baby,” Norawit says, checking the address.

“You’re not getting away with just a thank you.”

“I’ll take you out to dinner.”

“In Beverly Hills.”

“I’ll need a second job for that.”

“Deal. I’ll send you job listings,” she laughs. “Kick his ass if he messed up again. He’s exhausting.”

“I will.” Norawit smirks and blows a kiss into the phone. “Good night, beautiful.”

Ten minutes later, he arrives at the building and raises an eyebrow, pulling off his helmet. If the address is right, this is just an ordinary warehouse in an industrial zone. Storage units on one side, a factory on the other.

What the hell is North doing here this late?

The street is almost completely dark, lit only by a few lonely streetlights. Norawit spots his brother’s motorcycle parked far from the rest. So he really is here. There are also several sports cars that don’t fit the surroundings at all. Interesting.

Two rough-looking guys walk up to one of the warehouse doors and enter without any trouble. A few others smoke nearby. No signs. No labels. No clues.

His unease grows. The truth is right there, within reach, yet the closer it gets, the more afraid he is to face it.

Norawit waits, then follows a group inside, blending in. No one stops him. No one even looks at him.

Inside is a long corridor, almost like a school hallway, fluorescent lights buzzing softly above. At the end, double doors. Loud noise spills through them, a roar of voices. To the side, a staircase leads upward, guarded by two men who clearly aren’t letting just anyone through.

The doors open, and the noise doubles. The moment Norawit steps inside the huge hall, he understands everything.

The crowd forms a rough circle, screaming like animals. In the center is a ring enclosed by metal fencing, more like a cage. Fists slam into flesh, the sound echoing through the room, and the crowd cheers after every hit. Cameras are everywhere. Security stands calmly at the corners.

This isn't just underground fighting. This is a show. A brutal, organized spectacle. A real fight club.

"Fuck," Norawit mutters. "So this is where you go."

His eyes search desperately, hoping his brother is only watching. Someone slams into his shoulder, and he pushes closer to the ring.

"Finish him, Cerberus!" someone screams right next to him.

His gaze shifts to the horrific bloodshed, and the dull thud of his heartbeat echoes violently inside his skull, settling like lead in his chest. He freezes, as if paralyzed, staring at the ring where North is fighting.

Fuck.

His face is covered in blood, and he's just standing there by the cage, letting his opponent hit him — arms hanging limply at his sides. What the hell is he doing? Why isn't he defending himself? He has a perfect opening. The opponent is wide open, vulnerable to attack, but instead North quietly accepts blow after blow, even though he's more than capable of stopping this and fighting back.

His older brother knows his technique too well to be fooled. He can see it clearly now — North lowered his guard on purpose.

A blond fighter pins him against the fence and beats him with savage, relentless force.

With every sickening impact, something inside Norawit tightens painfully. It's horrifying — yet the crowd is ecstatic, feeding on every second of it. He's the only one who wants to tear everyone here apart just to make it stop. That's exactly why he avoids his fights. It hurts too much to watch. Sometimes he comes to support him, but enduring this again and again is unbearable. Every hit feels like it lands on his own body.

But what he's witnessing now is different from an ordinary fight. North is fighting differently.

So this is his show.

He lets them beat him for the crowd's amusement — only to tear victory away beautifully at the very end.

"Fuck, you idiot. What the hell are you doing?" Titicharoenrak mutters as he steps closer.

He frowns, studying his brother's face. One eye is badly bruised and swollen, his eyebrow split open. Blood pours from his nose and mouth, streaming down his bare torso and

splattering the ring. He's breathing hard, spitting blood — and then, suddenly, his lips curl into a smug, almost vicious smile, exposing teeth stained red. He doesn't look sane.

North roars like a rabid animal and slams his opponent to the floor. The crowd erupts, exploding into wild cheers before melting into a low, satisfied roar of pure, uncontrolled euphoria. In unison, they chant:

"Cerberus. Cerberus. Cerberus."

They love this. This is exactly the damn show they came for.

North suddenly straddles his opponent and starts raining blows down on his face with feral aggression and senseless hatred. He's lost it completely — snapped, torn loose from the chain. His fists come down again and again, heavy and precise, smashing the other man's face until the victim stops even trying to defend himself. Blood sprays everywhere. Bones are almost certainly shattered.

This isn't a fight anymore. It's a savage, inhuman beating.

He has never hit someone who was already down. Never. A fallen opponent was always a stop sign. If someone couldn't fight back, you backed off — that was weakness acknowledged. Even during his worst fits of rage, he'd always been able to stop himself.

But now he's finishing the boy off.

And if no one stops him, he'll kill him in front of everyone.

"North!" Norawit shouts, rushing to the fence. "Stop it! You'll kill him!"

But North doesn't hear him through the roar of the crowd.

He grabs his opponent by the throat with one hand, squeezing hard, and draws back his fist — but before he can strike, a brutal blow crashes into him from the side. For a few seconds he can't breathe at all. He collapses to the floor with a rough, strangled groan.

Norawit grabs him, yanks him upright, and slams him back against the fence, pinning him there with his forearm.

The crowd boos furiously from all sides — furious that someone interrupted such a beautiful fight — but Norawit hears nothing except his brother's ragged breathing. He scans his face anxiously and presses his neck harder into the metal.

North tries to strike back, to break free, but it's useless. He's spent. The fight has clearly been going on for a long time. His strength is gone. He only manages to weakly clutch at Norawit's shoulder and exhale heavily.

He's completely out of control.

He's looking at Norawit — but it's like he doesn't recognize him at all. His brown eyes are empty, glassy, clouded over by a dull haze. Norawit understands instantly. He's seen that look

before.

Fuck. This isn't just blind rage you can snap someone out of with stupid childhood rhymes. He's high. Still under the influence. He entered the fight before the drugs had fully worn off.

If Norawit hadn't intervened, this idiot would've killed someone while completely out of his mind.

"What are you doing?" Norawit asks, stunned, flicking a glance at the people around them, and rage crashes into him in a single, uncontrollable wave. "Have you completely lost it?!"

He shouts and slams his fist into North's face with everything he has.

"Fuck!" he roars. "So this is how you earn your money?! Letting them beat you just so they can watch?! Is that the show?! Is this what I fight for every damn day for you?! I hate you. You ungrateful bastard. I hate you!"

"Get off me!" North snarls, wrenching himself free. "You ruined everything! I wasn't done! Get out of here!"

"Not done?!" Norawit snaps, grabbing his jaw. "How does your show end then, with murder?! Do you even understand what's happening?! Are you even remotely in your right mind?! Or are your brains completely soaked in drugs?!"

He brutally turns North's face toward the opponent and forces him to look.

The man lies motionless in a pool of his own blood, barely breathing.

North looks at him from under lowered brows, but there's no realization there. No remorse. Nothing.

Just cold indifference.

The cruelty he's unleashed doesn't touch him at all. He doesn't comprehend what he's done. The only thing on his mind is that someone stopped him from finishing it.

"You nearly killed him! What the fuck were you thinking?!" Norawit screams in his face and delivers a sharp slap. "Wake up, North Titicharoenrak! Are you sick in the head?!"

"Get out of my way," North replies in a low, threatening voice that makes Norawit's blood run cold. He shifts his gaze to his brother, then growls and tries to break free again.

"What is happening to you?" Norawit asks more quietly now, shaking his head in horror. "You were never this cruel. Where did this come from? Why are you doing this? Yeah, our life isn't pretty — but that doesn't mean you get to break people and destroy yourself to earn money. Do you hear me?"

North keeps panting with rage, staring at him like he's the greatest enemy in his path.

It's terrifying.

There's a deep, pitch-black abyss in his eyes — nothing visible beyond raw aggression. Right now, he has no control over himself. This isn't him.

Either it's the drugs that haven't fully released him yet — or there's something else. There has to be a reason he's sunk to this level of brutality. He would never have allowed himself to become this.

What the hell is happening to him?

"I told you not to get involved," North mutters roughly, quietly enough that only Norawit can hear. "Get out of here before I ruin your life too."

The older brother exhales in defeat, glancing around, and lets him go.

The crowd has gone quiet now, watching them like this is a new, fascinating performance. Bastards. Every single one of them. The spectators, the organizers, all of them are sick.

Norawit's chest twists painfully. It hurts so much he can barely breathe, because he has no idea how to help him stop. Helplessness wraps around his throat and starts to choke him. For the first time in a long while, he feels like giving up completely.

He places his hands on North's shoulders and whispers, pleading, eyes shining with desperation:

"Please, Northie. Stop. You'll kill him. And what if next time it's you lying there? What will I do if they take you from me? I have nothing else. I'm nothing without you. I'm not whole. I need you like oxygen. We're nothing apart, remember?"

"Get lost," North snaps harshly, flicking a glance toward the camera before walking back to the center of the ring and shoving Norawit aside with his shoulder.

"No! Together we survive. Apart we're nothing. You always have to remember you have me! We're family! You're everything I have! Please, don't do this! You're better than this!"

Norawit sees clarity flicker in his brother's eyes, but suddenly his arms are seized from both sides and wrenched behind his back as he keeps trying to reach him. One of the guards punches him in the ribs. His breath knocks out of him instantly.

He doubles over slightly, dull pain blooming in his side, and looks at North through unwanted tears.

"Please!" he screams as they drag him toward the exit of the cage. "You're my brother! I need you! Please!"

"Shut up, idiot," North says quietly, turning away.

He stands beside his opponent, breathing heavily.

One more strike. Just one — and it'll be a clean knockout. The win will be his. The boss will be satisfied. The money will be good. One step closer to freedom.

He knows he's hurting the person he loves most. But he can't do anything else right now. Showing weakness would be used against him.

Through the roaring crowd, North faintly hears a desperate cry — a familiar voice breaking as it begs him to stop. His vision swims, clarity coming and going in flashes. He only half understands what's happening. The lingering drug effect mixed with raging adrenaline is a lethal combination.

Breathing becomes difficult. His body trembles. A strange panic rises in his chest.

He wants to close his eyes. To disappear. To shut himself off.

But something holds him back.

An anchor.

His anchor.

And something clicks in his mind again — his brother's voice, that terrified, furious look, the blow.

He's here.

Norawit.

"Norawit," North whispers, turning and searching the crowd.

He sees security dragging a brown-haired guy in a familiar jacket toward the exit. Norawit is fighting them, screaming.

"Don't do this! You're not like this!"

"Come on, Cerberus!" someone shouts.

"Please, North! You're better than this! You're not cruel! Don't be like them!"

"Finish him!" another voice yells.

"North, don't!"

"Do it!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Don't be like the ones who killed our parents!"

"I bet on you! Fight!"

"North! Please!"

The noise merges into a single, crushing roar. It pounds against his already fragile mind. His head feels like it's splitting open. He squeezes his eyes shut, breathing deeply. His hands shake violently. The only person tying him to reality is being dragged farther and farther away.

Even if he wanted to stop, he couldn't. There is no choice. Better not to look.

This is his mess. Norawit shouldn't have to fix it. Not this time.

He opens his eyes and sees his opponent struggling upright, lifting a hand. Surrender. Mercy.

Damn it. Not this.

North exhales deeply, wipes the blood from his nose. He hates this more than anything. There's nothing worse than finishing someone who's begging for mercy, but without a knockout, the win won't count. And if he loses, the boss won't be pleased.

He closes his eyes again, then delivers his signature kick straight to the head.

Perfect. As always.

The opponent collapses unconscious. The referee declares North the winner, lifting his hand. Cheers erupt. North looks toward the exit — and something inside his battered soul shatters.

He meets Norawit's eyes.

His brother is still there. Silent now. Just staring at him in shock. Confusion and devastation written all over his face. In that look, North finally understands just how deep he's fallen — and how monstrously wrong he's been.

Security grabs Norawit again, dragging him backward toward the exit. As he's pulled away, North sees something he's never seen before in those kind, familiar eyes.

Painful disappointment.

And in that moment, he realizes the threads binding them together are tearing — threads Norawit has been knotting and holding this whole time. Norawit has been fighting for both of them. Keeping them afloat. Being their source of strength.

And North has ruined everything.

Again.

Security drags Titicharoenrak straight toward the staircase he noticed earlier while walking down the long corridor. His legs feel unsteady as he's forced up the steps. At the top, he barely reaches a heavy oak door before someone shoves him roughly inside.

He stumbles over the threshold and drops to his knees on a black carpet. After a moment, he slowly pushes himself up and looks around, frowning.

The room has no windows and is lit entirely by artificial light. Dark green walls without any decoration, furniture made of polished redwood. A leather couch and a bar occupy one side of the room, where several women are lounging, clearly from some kind of elite escort service. The air is thick with the smell of alcohol, cigarette smoke hanging heavy and suffocating, like stepping into the den of some crime lord. It's not a pleasant place.

One wall is covered with large screens broadcasting the fight in the ring, and Norawit understands immediately. These cameras aren't for security. People in this room are watching the fights live from here. It's sick.

On the other side of the room stands a round table covered in green felt. Strange men sit around it, calmly playing poker, completely indifferent to the guest who's just been thrown inside. Alongside cards and chips, Norawit notices bottles of alcohol and weapons lying openly on the table.

Shit. Just what he needed.

He swallows hard and exhales quietly, realizing something deeply wrong is happening here. These must be the rich bastards North talked about, the ones who pay to watch blood spill.

Movement catches his eye to the right. Norawit turns sharply.

A man sits in a luxurious leather armchair, relaxed, one leg crossed over the other, watching the screens flicker. He's the only one here of solid age, around sixty. His face is dry and wrinkled, cheeks sunken, eyes black and cold. He has a straight, neat nose and is dressed in an immaculate dark suit with a white shirt. He shifts his heavy gaze to Norawit, studies him with interest, then hums to himself in quiet satisfaction.

Two guards remain behind Norawit, while an Asian man rises from the poker table. Norawit instinctively takes a step back.

The man is young, only a few years older at most. His suit and the expensive watch on his wrist radiate wealth. He adjusts the sleeves of his dark blue jacket and smiles pleasantly. His features are slightly sharp yet soft at the same time, defined cheekbones, a straight nose, and striking blue eyes with a piercing gaze. His black hair is styled neatly, swept back from his forehead, the sides shaved clean with two thin lines etched into one temple. Norawit notices tattoos on his hand and a small earring in his ear.

There's something deeply unsettling about him. His presence radiates danger, even though his appearance alone doesn't repel.

“Interesting,” the man says, raising a thick eyebrow as he looks Norawit over from head to toe.

“What’s going on here?” Norawit asks, glancing around again.

“First, introduce yourself. What’s your name?”

“And yours?” Norawit asks, lifting his chin defiantly.

The stranger laughs venomously and picks up a glass from the table. He strolls lazily past his friends, who continue playing, and stops directly in front of him.

“Damian Lim.”

“Norawit Titicharoenrak.”

“Titicharoenrak?” Damian raises his eyebrows. “I know one Titicharoenrak quite well.”

“I noticed. So it’s you,” Norawit says, narrowing his eyes. “You’re the one in charge here, aren’t you? Of course. Who else would it be. Not the Al Capone sitting in the chair. He told me you had business together. Now I see what kind. You make money off him.”

Damian smiles faintly and hums.

“Same face. Same temper. Same sharp tongue. You’re brothers, clearly,” he says, nodding as if agreeing with himself. “Interesting. Cerberus never told me about you.”

“He has a name,” Norawit snaps. “He’s not your damn dog.”

“Of course. But I’m free to call him whatever I like,” Damian replies calmly, finishing his drink. “He belongs to me.”

“What the hell are you talking about? What did you do to him? What is this?” Norawit demands.

“Nothing special. He works.”

“And you watch.”

“And I watch.”

“What are you, some kind of pervert? Does cruelty turn you on? You like watching fights and getting off on it?” Norawit scoffs. “What you encourage is not normal. What did you do to my brother? He wasn’t himself.”

“Your brother is a budding addict,” Damian says evenly. “Why he’s like that isn’t my problem. I’m just collecting a debt.”

Norawit’s breath catches.

“Damn it… it was you. You’re the one who kept him out of prison.”

“Of course I did. Who else would bother?”

“Why?”

“I had my reasons.”

“What reasons? What do you want from him?”

“Looks like he didn’t tell you much,” Damian says calmly. “Your brother owes me a large sum. The only way he can repay it is by working for me. He’s not exactly a thinker, but his fists are useful. My friends enjoy watching his fights. I make money. His debt slowly goes down. No coercion. No violence.”

“Just blackmail,” Norawit mutters. “What does he owe you for? How much?”

“You planning to pay it for him?” Damian smirks, scanning him. “No offense, but judging by your clothes, the most valuable thing you own is a bike or a car. You can’t handle this.”

“Don’t decide what I can and can’t do,” Norawit snaps. “I’ll work it off for him. Leave him alone. Did you see what state he’s in? He almost killed that guy.”

“Your brother has done much worse than that fight,” Damian laughs.

“What?” Norawit stiffens. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on,” Damian waves it off. “He was in charge of inspecting a building used for underground fights. A fire broke out. People died. Tragic, right?” he chuckles. “He’s facing serious time. One word from me, and he’ll rot behind bars for decades. Maybe for life.”

“Then why help him?”

“There was a warehouse of mine in that school building,” Damian says coolly. “Everything burned. Do you know how much that cost me? Someone has to pay. If he doesn’t have the cash, he pays the way he knows how.”

“Fuck,” Norawit breathes, running a hand through his hair. “There were drugs there, weren’t there?”

“You’re smart,” Damian smirks. “All the brains in the family went to you? Yes. My product.”

“How much does he owe now?” Norawit asks.

“Two,” Damian says, sitting down beside the older man.

“Two?”

“And a half.”

“No,” Norawit whispers, shaking his head. “No…”

“Yes. Two and a half million. You got that kind of money?”

“He’ll work for you his whole life to pay that off,” Norawit says quietly.

“I don’t mind,” Damian shrugs, smiling. “Watching him is entertaining.”

“He’ll destroy himself,” Norawit murmurs, staring at the screens. “One day they’ll beat him to death. He lets himself get hit just to entertain you.”

“He’ll destroy himself with drugs or alcohol anyway. And if he dies in the ring, you’ll take over the debt,” Damian spreads his hands. “I thought he had no one. Turns out I was wrong. If he burns out, I’ll let you step in.”

So that’s why North pushed him away. Why he was afraid to show he cared. He knew if they realized how close they were, they’d both be finished. He was protecting him.

“You’re sick,” Norawit says with disgust. “You and your friends are completely fucked in the head.”

“I’ve been called worse,” Damian shrugs. “You won’t offend me.”

“Let me take his debt.”

Damian smiles slowly. “Oh? A reckless hero?”

“He’s my brother. I won’t let some rich piece of trash like you use him as a puppet in your twisted little reality show,” Norawit snaps, nodding toward the men at the table.

Damian only smirks, and then Norawit is suddenly knocked off his feet by a brutal punch to the jaw. His face goes numb with pain, a sharp ringing filling his ears. Before he can recover, another blow lands, then another, then another. The guards beat him until he’s gasping on the floor, clutching his ribs.

Damian lifts a hand, stopping them. His blue eyes study Norawit calmly, waiting for him to beg.

Norawit spits blood and pushes himself onto his knees.

“Apologize,” Damian says lazily. “You insulted me and my guests.”

“Go to hell,” Norawit spits. “All of you. My opinion won’t change just because you beat me.”

Damian nods once.

The kick comes hard and fast, straight to the head. Darkness swallows him for a moment. When Norawit opens his eyes again, the ceiling spins. Damian crouches beside him, examining his bloodied face.

“Now we’re even,” he says calmly. “You interrupted a fight and insulted everyone here. Now, back to business. You want to take your brother’s debt?” he tilts his head. “Can you fight like him?”

“No.”

“Not good enough. So what are you good at?”

Norawit forces himself upright.

“Racing. Motorcycles.”

“Racing,” Damian repeats softly, then smiles sharply. “That could be useful.”

“You’ll let North go?”

Damian laughs quietly and shakes his head.

“No, my friend. Now you’ll both be working for me.”

Venice Beach is one of the most famous beaches in Los Angeles, a popular tourist destination and, perhaps, one of Norawit’s favorite places in the city. In the evenings, when the crowds begin to thin, it’s perfect for walking along the ocean or simply sitting and watching the waves. You can easily strike up a conversation with a stranger here, or just as easily disappear into complete solitude.

It stretches along the Pacific coast and has been a special place for their family for many years. Street performers usually gather along the promenade, artists from every corner of the city mixed with the occasional eccentric local. The atmosphere is always creative, slightly unhinged. Even now, street musicians wander among the people, trying to earn a little money. Somewhere in the distance, one of them is playing. A soft guitar melody drifts through the evening air, accompanied by a calm, steady voice singing something beautiful.

Large waves roll lazily toward the shore, crashing into one another with a soothing, rhythmic sound. The sun is already sinking beyond the horizon, painting the sky in an impossible palette of deep blue, orange, and faint pink. It’s incredible how nature manages to create sunsets and sunrises so different and yet so breathtaking every single day. A few surfers catch waves far from the shore, and Norawit watches them with quiet envy. The warm breeze brushes against his skin, and he inhales deeply.

He sits alone, far from everyone else, barefoot on the warm sand. Sitting cross-legged, he leans back on his hands and tilts his head slightly upward, staring at the clear horizon. He lets himself linger in the colors, in the fleeting beauty of the day slipping away.

He's been thinking about many things. About how he and his brother are in deep trouble again. He understands perfectly well that they've both gotten tangled up in something far too serious, and he has no idea how they're supposed to get out of it. Two and a half million dollars. An unreal amount of money, something they could spend their entire lives trying to pay off. With North, everything is painfully clear. But what kind of work awaits him himself remains a complete mystery.

Someone suddenly sits down beside him on the sand. Norawit slowly turns his head toward the person who disturbed his solitude. He knew the younger one would find him if he wanted to talk about everything that had happened. This place is far too important to both of them. He studies his face carefully and exhales heavily when he notices the damage left behind by that brutal fight.

A dark baseball cap hides part of his face, but the swollen eye is impossible to miss, along with the deep purple bruise spreading across half his cheek and the split eyebrow. Norawit himself looks better than his brother, despite what happened to him in Lim's office. His eyebrow is bruised, his jaw aches terribly, but his sides took the worst of it, still covered in dark hematomas. At least there are no broken bones. He knows how to defend himself.

North looks at him with guilt-filled eyes, like a child caught doing something unforgivable. He quickly lowers his gaze, shame heavy in his expression. He sighs quietly and bites his lip until the skin breaks. Norawit turns back toward the water and lets his eyelids fall halfway shut, watching the waves.

"I…" North begins, then inhales sharply, gathering his thoughts. "Nor, I'm sorry. I'm really guilty. I'll fix everything. I promise."

"What do you dream about, Northie?"

"What?" he asks, confused, shaking his head. "Dream about what?"

"Yes. I've noticed that small, insignificant things can make me happy. Turns out, if you focus on what you have right here, right now, instead of waiting for something bigger, you can live a pretty happy life. When everything feels unbearable, I think about those things, and it gets a little easier. I like dreaming. Who's going to take that away from me?"

"Like what?" North asks quietly.

Norawit inhales deeply, the air scented with sweets and fast food, and closes his eyes, leaning into the warm wind.

"The sun. The sound of the ocean. A good breakfast. Mountains. The purring sound Jumu makes. Peonies. Summer rain and the smell of dust pressed into the road afterward. The rustle of book pages. Music. Mom's laughter. Fireworks. Pink pads on a cat's paws. Vanilla ice cream with chocolate chips. The scent of blooming cherry trees," he says, smiling softly at the last words. "I dream of having as many of these small yet important things in my life as possible. And I dream of waking up happy every morning. Is that too much to ask? No. But it's so hard to feel it and keep hold of it. And I want you to smile. To find something that brings you the same joy. What about you? What do you dream of?"

“Of not disappointing you anymore,” North whispers after a pause, looking at him. “I don’t need much in this life. Just you being happy. If you’re happy, then so am I. That’s our rule. It works both ways. When I’m miserable, you are too. I want that to end. I want to do something good. Something right. At least once. I want to be a good brother.”

Norawit looks at him sternly from beneath furrowed brows, like a disapproving parent, and sighs deeply. That sad tone in his voice always fills him with fear. What thoughts live inside his head? What does he tell himself when he believes he’s one of the worst people in the world? It isn’t true, but North can’t see anything good in himself. One of the hardest things in life is learning to recognize your own worth. Loving someone is difficult. Loving yourself is even harder.

“When we were at scout camp in elementary school,” Norawit says suddenly, looking away, “you got into a fight with Henry from the third group.”

“What?” North asks, surprised. “That’s what you’re bringing up now?”

“You broke his nose and accidentally damaged the climbing equipment. Remember?”

“Yeah, but…”

“You ran before the counselor caught the culprit and came straight to me. He saw your clothes but didn’t see your face. You told me everything. Remember what I did?”

“I put on your clothes and went back to the scene of the crime,” North says quietly, nodding.

“That’s right. I took the blame.”

“Why?”

“It’s funny, isn’t it? I always did that. We were kids, but even then I knew no one would feel sorry for you if they caught you. You’d have been sent home, and our parents would’ve torn you apart. I was scared for you. Henry threatened serious consequences. I didn’t want you punished again. You were happy there. You were always the kid who fought, caused trouble, made noise. Your reputation ran ahead of you.”

“I still don’t understand why you did it,” North says with a sad smile, turning his cap backward. “You got punished instead. You worked in the cafeteria alone for a week and didn’t get any sweets. You didn’t even get to watch the outdoor movie you wanted so badly.”

“It wasn’t that bad. Though I’m still bitter about missing that movie,” Norawit admits. “It was a small price to pay for your innocence. No one figured it out. I apologized to Henry. Even he believed he fought me. Our parents paid for the equipment, and we finished the camp and went home happy.”

“I remember,” North nods. “But why are you telling me this now?”

“We thought we fooled the adults, remember? We were so proud. But months later, Mom told me she knew everything from the moment the camp called. She said she admired what I did, that you didn’t betray the plan, not out of fear, but because you trusted me. She said that kind

of trust is rare. That's what real brothers are. An unbreakable front. She asked us to never keep secrets from our family. Love is born from trust."

"Why are you telling me this?" North asks, studying his profile.

"First, because keeping secrets from each other is our one taboo. We were always honest, and that's why we're so close. Now there's a wall between us, and you feel it too. I can't hold this alone. It has to be both of us. And second," Norawit says, gently squeezing his shoulder, "because I've always protected you and I always will, even when you don't let me. You won't break my need to shield you from this cruel world."

North exhales deeply, resting his head on his hand and staring at the sand. A storm of emotions tightens his chest. It hurts knowing his brother feels them drifting apart because of him. And it's humiliating that Norawit saw him at his worst. His weakness. His helplessness. The way he pushes him away, snaps at him, hurts him. He only wanted to protect him, not drag him into this mess. He wanted to do better, but it turned out the same as always.

"I have a lot of questions," Norawit says quietly, turning to him. "But there's only one that matters right now."

"What is it?" North asks, his voice trembling.

"Do you need me?" Norawit asks seriously. "Because if not, I won't try anymore."

"Yes," North answers immediately, frowning. "Of course. What kind of stupid question is that? You're all I have."

"It's not stupid when I hear it from you once every few years," Norawit says softly, lowering his gaze. "It matters. People should say these things while there's still time. Having that chance is a gift. I love you. It's not hard for me to say. Especially now, when I have no one closer. I hope one day you'll get there too."

"I'm sorry, Nor," North whispers. "I really am. I'm the worst brother in the world. You deserved someone better. You think I don't know that?" He lets out a bitter laugh. "You're so tactile, so fragile. Behind all that sharp attitude is the same boy who held my fingers in his sleep and was afraid to sleep alone. I still see him. I'll never forget him. He's part of me. I know you need hugs, need to hear that you matter. And you want to hear it from me. I know. It's just… it's hard for me." He sighs heavily. "I don't know how to say these things like you or Mom. All I know how to do is destroy things. But you are important to me." He lowers his voice and takes Norawit's hand, pressing their forearms together. Their tattoos align, forming a single phrase. "I wouldn't have survived this long without you. We both know that. I need you more than you need me. I'm sorry I don't say it enough."

Norawit studies the words on their skin and nods thoughtfully, remembering the day they got them. United we stand, divided we are nothing. It had always been their favorite phrase. Because it was true.

"I know you were trying to protect me," Norawit says gently. "That's why you pushed me away so desperately lately. You were afraid they'd see your weakness. Right?"

“Yes. I never told anyone about you,” North admits, rubbing his face. “I was terrified they’d come after you.”

“Okay,” Norawit says, brushing his hand along his neck. “Now tell me everything about this Damian. I want to know who I’m working for.”

“What?” North stares at him. “No. You’re joking. Don’t tell me he forced you.”

“You owe two and a half million,” Norawit replies calmly. “You didn’t really think he’d only squeeze it out of you, did you? He would’ve come after your family eventually. You won’t earn that kind of money with your fists.”

“He said you’d work with me?”

“Yes.”

North closes his eyes and exhales sharply. It dawns on him that Norawit wasn’t just thrown out of the building during the fight. He was taken to see the boss. Damian didn’t like what happened in the ring. And now he knows he has a twin. Damn it. Everything is far worse than he thought.

“I’m such an idiot,” he whispers.

“Easy. You are an idiot, but that’s not the point,” Norawit mutters. “We need to figure out how to get out of this.”

“I tried to keep you away from it. I didn’t tell him I had a brother, and I still dragged you into this myself,” North says, covering his face. “If I’d been honest, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“How did you meet him?” Norawit asks.

“He came to me after one fight. Like a scout. He travels underground rings looking for fighters. He gave me a place to fight, and I participated in staged matches. I just had to fight beautifully, make the rich spectators happy. You saw it.”

“Did he pay well?”

“Yeah.”

“But not just cash,” Norawit guesses. “That’s what hooked you.”

North nods slowly.

“So he’s the one who kept giving you drugs. A real piece of shit. He saw how vulnerable you were and used it.”

“I thought we worked well together,” North says quietly. “No threats. Just business.”

“But?” Norawit presses. “I saw your fight near the Loop.”

“He ordered me to kill the opponent in the ring,” North admits, barely audible. “Finish him when he was down. The audience wanted it.”

“What?” Norawit exclaims. “Is he insane?”

North nods, staring at his battered knuckles.

“I couldn’t do it. He lost a lot of money. That’s when he started threatening me. He said if I couldn’t kill one, he’d hang dozens on me. I’d work for him until I died.”

“And he framed you,” Norawit says slowly. “The fire. His own building.”

“Yes. He made me his debtor and stayed clean legally.”

“So you’re the only one blamed.”

“Yes.”

“Bastard,” Norawit mutters.

“He got me out using his connections. Now he controls everything. If I go against him, he’ll reopen the case.”

“Unbelievable,” Norawit whispers. “You’re in deep shit, Northie. We both are.”

“If I could just pay him, he’d leave me alone.”

“Then we’ll do it together,” Norawit says faintly smiling. “Maybe by retirement.”

“That’s not funny. Because of me, you’re trapped too.”

“You think he’d really let you go?”

“He promised. I don’t trust it. But it’s all we have.”

Norawit sighs quietly. “You really know how to make my life interesting, North Titicharoenrak.”

“I saw your look back then,” North whispers. “You were disappointed.”

“I didn’t know how to react,” Norawit admits. “You hit someone begging for mercy. Didn’t anything stop you?”

“I had no choice,” North says. “With him, there is no choice.”

“That’s why you use more now?” Norawit asks gently. “To escape? You were high in that fight. What’s next? You’ll follow his order next time?”

North doesn’t answer. Norawit lifts his chin, studying the bruises.

“There’s nothing that could make me disappointed in you,” Norawit says firmly. “I’m disappointed in myself. I promised our parents I’d protect you.” He pulls him into an embrace. “We’ll get out of this together. I won’t leave you. Not even if it costs me everything.”

“Norawit,” North whispers, holding him tighter.

“Yes?”

“I love you. More than anything. I’m sorry I don’t say it enough.”

For the first time in years, Norawit hears the words he’s been waiting for. They hurt in the sweetest way. His chest fills with warmth.

“One smart person once told me I should be grateful that you feel it, even when you don’t say it,” Norawit replies with a smile. “So thank you.”

A week later, while Norawit was nursing his wounds after the beating and obsessively calculating where and how he could scrape together the required sum, a short message arrived on his phone from an unknown number.

It was brief, precise, and painfully clear. He immediately understood who was ordering him to come to the address listed in the text.

A trailer park in Vermont Vista was a godawful place for business meetings. That neighborhood had already brought nothing but trouble to his family—after all, it was right here that the fire had happened not so long ago. An unpleasant tension prickled under his skin, his nerves humming with unease. Nothing good could possibly come from this meeting. The only question was how bad it was going to be.

This area was infamous for its high crime rate. If Sotell, where Norawit lived, mostly survived on poverty and petty theft, here people could kill you without blinking and no one would ever ask questions. Practically a death valley. Maybe that was exactly why he’d been summoned here. And yet it made no sense, Lim needed him alive.

He stops on the dark parking lot a little after one in the morning, just as instructed. Removing his helmet, he scans the area. To the left, a turnoff leading toward a forest edge. To the right, an abandoned gas station. The place feels wrong instantly, crawling under his skin. Places like this are perfect for quiet murders—no witnesses, no consequences.

About fifty meters away, beyond a fence, stand rows of trailers swallowed by darkness. Most of them house addicts, criminals, alcoholics, or people barely holding on to their sanity. Either they're empty, which is unlikely, or everyone is already asleep. It's too quiet. Unnaturally calm for a criminal district. There aren't many trailers, and the ones that are there look beaten down beyond repair. Poverty thrives here. These people barely survive in a cruel world, scraping by day to day.

So why the hell was he dragged here?

Five minutes later, while he nervously smokes beside his motorcycle, an expensive car glides into the parking lot. A low, smooth growl announces its arrival—a fully tinted black sports car, a famous model. It stops elegantly to his left. Norawit lifts his brows, genuinely stunned.

A legend. Not just a car.

He'd only seen vehicles like this in movies about luxury lives. The sleek lines and flawless exterior make him exhale softly in awe. That thing costs anywhere between one hundred fifty to two hundred thousand dollars. Insane. It must be incredible to casually spend that kind of money on a car when someone else could live half their life on it.

The engine dies. The headlights go dark, plunging the lot into half-shadow. The door opens, and a familiar, deeply unpleasant figure steps out with unhurried grace.

Damian Lim looks like a devil straight out of a party in hell. Black hair styled to perfection frames a sculpted face, and his piercing blue eyes burn with icy contempt. He adjusts the collar of his snow-white shirt and exhales briefly, glancing around. His appearance, along with the car, feels like an insult among all this poverty. A mockery of the people who live here.

He unbuttons his jacket and slips his hands into the pockets of his expensive trousers, approaching Norawit. The wind carries the scent of his costly perfume, musk and something sharp, straight into Norawit's lungs.

"You're punctual. Good evening, Norawit Titicharoenrak," Lim says, stopping a few steps away.

Norawit nods curtly, saying nothing. His irritation is obvious. Damian's gaze lingers on his face, pausing on the split eyebrow, before drifting down to the motorcycle.

"Good thing you've got transportation. You'll need it tonight."

"What do you want from me?"

"I found you a job. You said you can ride. Perfect. I need that skill right now."

"What kind of job?" Norawit asks warily.

"Simple. You'll pick something up and bring it to my warehouse."

"What exactly?"

“That’s none of your concern. Your task is to deliver the backpack into my hands—intact,” Damian says coldly.

“Just deliver it?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Where is it?”

Damian nods toward the trailers and smiles slyly. So that’s why they’re here. Now it makes sense. Dirty work. And judging by the location, getting that backpack won’t be easy.

“There’s a white Nissan parked near trailer number zero four six. The backpack is inside. Take it and bring it to me. And don’t do anything stupid,” he orders.

“You want me to steal it from someone’s car?” Norawit asks in disbelief.

“Theft is taking what belongs to someone else. You’ll be retrieving what was stolen from me.”

“Then why don’t you get it yourself?”

“I could,” Damian replies, grimacing as he looks at the trailer park, “but I don’t associate with that kind of people. I’m squeamish. Just being near this place makes my skin crawl. The thought of stepping into one of those… homes to speak with them makes me nauseous.”

“And that’s it? I expected something more…”

“Criminal?” Lim laughs.

“Something like that. This is shady, sure, but at least I won’t have to kill anyone.”

Damian chuckles softly, dimples appearing on his cheeks.

“Don’t worry. If the cops don’t cross your path, everything will be just fine.”

“Am I transporting something illegal?” Norawit asks suspiciously.

“Oh no, nothing of the sort. I’m giving you…” Damian checks a watch worth half the price of his car, “…an hour and a half. Time starts now. If you’re late or screw up, I’ll shoot your knees as punishment. Good luck.”

He smiles gently, as if he hasn’t just threatened him, gets back into the car, and drives away.

Unbelievable. He really just ordered him to steal something and left. What a phenomenal bastard.

Norawit exhales heavily, checking the time on his phone and setting a timer. Ninety minutes. Not as much as it sounds when the task is complicated. Especially since Damian’s warehouse is about twenty-five minutes away. Why give him such a margin? None of this feels right.

Pulling his hood up, Norawit heads toward the trailers.

He climbs over the steel fence easily. With every step closer, panic tightens in his chest. In near-total darkness, he squints at the numbers on the trailers, moving quietly to avoid making noise.

“Forty-three,” he whispers, passing one. “Forty-four… should be close.”

He freezes.

A low, vicious growl sounds nearby. A dog. A big one.

Shit. Of course.

Slowly, barely breathing, Norawit turns toward the sound and swallows hard. A massive fighting-breed dog with a thick collar stares at him, teeth bared. If it barks, he’s done.

He exhales softly, scanning his surroundings. No sudden movements. He steps back slowly, eyes locked on the animal. The growl deepens, the dog coiling as if ready to launch.

“Easy, boy,” Norawit whispers. “Easy…”

The dog barks loudly. Lights flick on in the trailer behind it. A screen door bangs open, and a man with a shotgun storms out.

Norawit darts sideways, diving behind a car just in time. The dog doesn’t chase him, probably tied, though he hadn’t noticed.

Peeking out, Norawit watches the man scan the darkness with a flashlight, gun ready. He pets the dog, still alert.

“Someone there, buddy?” the man mutters with a smirk. “Or you chasing stray cats again?”

Relief crashes over Norawit as the man lowers the gun and goes back inside, dog in tow.

That was too close.

After waiting a few minutes, Norawit moves again. Trailer zero four six. The white Nissan is there. The trailer beside it is dark, though flickering TV light dances against the walls. The owner’s home. Great. This just got harder.

He crouches beside the driver’s door and spots the backpack on the back seat. Locked. Of course.

Breaking the window isn’t an option. He’s never done this before. No tools. No clue.

So he does the only thing he can think of.

He pulls out his phone and calls the one person who can help.

They haven't talked in a week. Norawit didn't want Nattawat to see his injuries. The first call goes unanswered. The second finally connects.

"Are you insane?" Nattawat mutters sleepily. "You ignore my calls, then call me in the middle of the night. Have you seen the time?"

"Good morning," Norawit whispers, eyeing the trailer windows.

"Go to hell."

"I need your help."

"What? Speak up. I can barely hear you."

"I need your help, Nat."

Silence. Then seriousness.

"What happened?"

"You're the only thief in my contacts. I need you to help me break into a car."

"Okay, bye. Thanks for waking me, idiot—"

"I really need help. Right now," Norawit cuts in quietly. "Please. You can yell at me later."

"…Where did you get yourself stuck?"

"I'll explain later. Can you do it or not?"

"…Yeah," Nattawat sighs. "I know a thing or two."

"It's an old Nissan."

"Alright. Look around. You need rope or wire. About a meter. Steel wire's best."

Norawit scans the area—nothing. Then he spots a kite tied to a tree. Perfect. He cuts the string with the small knife he always carries.

"I've got rope. From a kite."

"That'll do. Make a big loop in the middle."

"Done."

"Slide it through the top corner of the driver's door. Use something flat to pry it—plastic card works. Loop it around the lock rod, tighten, pull."

"I think I got it."

"Try. I'll stay on."

Norawit sets the phone on the roof, breathes deeply, and follows the instructions. His hands shake. He keeps glancing at the trailer. Heart pounding. Finally—

Click.

The door opens.

Holy shit. It worked.

“You’re a real criminal, Nat,” Norawit whispers, grabbing the backpack.

“Did it work?”

“Yes.”

“Now explain.”

“Later,” Norawit mutters as light flicks on in the trailer. “Shit. Gotta go.”

He hangs up, runs.

Shouts erupt behind him. He vaults the fence, jumps on his bike, and takes off. Engines roar. The white Nissan and a blue car follow.

So that’s what Damian meant.

Norawit guns it.

The chase is fast, brutal, terrifying. He cuts toward a residential sector. He knows these streets, Phuwin lives here.

He slips into a narrow passage between houses. A car can’t follow. Gunshots ring out behind him.

He makes it.

Hiding the bike, covering it, he runs.

Breathing hard. Heart racing.

But he’s alive.

And for now—that’s enough.

Titicharoenrak runs for so long it feels like an eternity. Houses and familiar streets blur past his vision, but he knows he’s heading in the right direction. In some places he has to vault over fences and climb across barriers, but it seems he’s managed to put some distance between himself and them. He hears no gunshots, no engine roaring behind him. The road he needs should be close now — that’s where Cipher is supposed to pick him up.

Norawit squeezes through a hole in the fence, breathing hard, then turns the corner past a large hospital building. He comes out onto the same road he turned off at earlier — only much farther down. He's managed to cut through cleanly. He glances around, watching the passing cars, half-expecting to see his pursuers, but everything seems clear. He reaches into his pocket for his phone to call Phuwin and turns the corner again — then freezes.

Right in front of him stands a white Nissan he had hoped never to see again.

"Fuck," Norawit whispers and immediately steps back.

"Freeze!" a man shouts, aiming a gun straight at him.

Norawit stares at the barrel pointed directly at his head and swallows hard. In a split second, his insides twist into a tight knot and nausea rises in his throat. He hadn't been prepared for them to chase him, let alone for them to be armed. He tries to think, aggressively searching for a way out, but panic scatters his thoughts in every direction, leaving him with nothing solid to cling to. A gun isn't pointed at him very often, only a few times in his life, really, but the feeling is always the same. Terrifying.

"Hands up!" the man yells, and Norawit slowly obeys.

"Listen, I think you've got the wrong guy," Norawit says, opening his palms. "I was just heading home."

"Shut up!"

"But I really—"

"I said shut your mouth! Give the backpack back!"

"But it's mine. I don't under—"

The man fires into the air. Norawit flinches, eyes squeezing shut, and when he opens them again, the gun is pointed at him once more. Shit. Is he really that serious about protecting this damn backpack?

"Give it back. Now."

"Alright," Norawit says quietly, keeping his hands raised. "Alright. Just put the gun down."

"No sudden moves, asshole. Take it off slowly and throw it to me!"

Norawit exhales heavily, realizing he has no choice. He's unarmed, and there's no one around to help. He'll have to give it back and deal with the consequences, including Damian Lim, on his own. Looks like he's about to fail his very first job for him.

He scans the area and carefully slides the backpack straps off his shoulders, never taking his eyes off the gun. One wrong move and he's dead. This man won't hesitate. Is he scared? Terrified. He's often balanced on the edge between life and death, riding dangerously fast, but

this feeling is different. This is helplessness. Knowing you have no way to protect yourself. And it's the worst feeling in the world.

"What are you waiting for? Drop it and hands behind your head!"

Norawit nods, about to comply — when suddenly his ears catch the low growl of a familiar engine nearby. He frowns in confusion. What the hell is he doing here?

Norawit turns toward the sound and sees a black Mustang burst around the corner, braking sharply right behind him.

"Hey, sexy," Nattawat calls out, wiggling his eyebrows as he opens the passenger door. "Need a ride? Hurry!"

Everything happens in seconds. The armed man stares in shock as his captured prey slips right out of his grasp, snarling in fury. Norawit doesn't waste the moment, he sprints to the car, jumps in, tosses the backpack at his feet, and Nattawat peels off, tires screeching.

The Mustang rockets down the road, carrying them far away as their pursuer screams after them.

"Holy shit," Norawit breathes, pulling his hood down and running a hand through his hair. "How did you even get here?"

"I tracked your location," Nattawat replies. "Pahn and I are friends, in case you forgot."

"Why did you even come?" Norawit asks, looking at him. "I thought you were asleep."

"I just—" Nattawat hesitates, then shakes his head sharply. "Never mind. Screw you. What does it matter? I saved you. You could at least say thank you."

"Trust me, I didn't plan on getting into this kind of trouble tonight."

"And you had the nerve to call me a thief?" Nattawat scoffs, shifting gears. "You're unbelievable. You're no better than me. Why did you do it?"

"I'll explain later, baby. Right now they're on our tail," Norawit says, checking the side mirror. Two of them again — a blue car joins the chase. "Lose them."

Nattawat shoots him an irritated look but exhales and accelerates. Norawit buckles up, trying to steady his breathing after the frantic run. When he'd seen Nattawat appear like that, he'd honestly thought it was the end. But Nattawat really did save him, showed up at exactly the right moment. He's usually the one rescuing everyone else, but this time someone came for him. And it feels unbelievably good to know he's not alone.

The Mustang blows through red lights, horns blaring in protest behind them. Nattawat drives like a force of nature, tearing through the streets like a titan. Norawit glances at him, his gaze lingering over his profile. Damn him, he's beautiful. The worst possible moment to think that, but he looks like the lead of some high-budget action movie. His hands grip the wheel until his knuckles turn white, muscles tensing beneath caramel skin as he snaps the gear shift into

place. His expression is sharp, focused, dangerous. Brows drawn together, lips pressed tight. He radiates raw, lethal energy.

“Natt.”

“What?” Nattawat snaps without looking away from the road.

“You’re insanely hot right now.”

“Titicharoenrak, go to hell. We have a problem, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I can’t help it,” Norawit smiles innocently. “I like you too much.”

Sudden gunshots ring out. They both curse. Norawit looks in the mirror and sees someone leaning out of the blue car’s passenger window, firing at them.

“There are two of them?” he mutters.

None of the bullets hit, Nattawat’s driving is too fast, too sharp, but it’s still terrifying.

“What the hell is this?” Nattawat yells. “What did you steal that they want to kill you for?!”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?! What the fuck, Norawit?!”

Norawit bites his lip, staying silent. His blood is roaring in his veins, heat flooding his body, sweat breaking across his forehead. Nattawat takes a brutal turn with his signature maneuver, slides into another, then floors it on a straight stretch. A few minutes later, they both realize they’ve lost them. No one else could pull off driving like that.

Only when they reach the hills does Nattawat finally slow down, turning off onto a dirt road.

The Mustang stops in the darkness at the top of a hill. Nattawat leans back in his seat, breathing hard, adrenaline and anger still coursing through him. The view helps, city lights scattered below like diamonds, glowing endlessly. There’s a better view near the famous letters, but it’s guarded and crowded. This place is just as beautiful — quiet, known only to locals.

“What the hell was that?” Nattawat demands.

“I’m sorry,” Norawit says softly, staring out at the view.

“Are you kidding me?” Nattawat explodes, shoving his shoulder so hard he slams into the door. “You ignore me for a week, then call me in the middle of the night to help break into a car, and suddenly armed men are chasing you! Are you insane?! What did you do?! Who did you rob?!”

“I didn’t think it would end like this.”

“You didn’t think at all! You don’t have a brain to think with! Great — now I’m your accomplice!”

“You weren’t there. Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone you were involved.”

“Oh wow, thanks so much,” Nattawat snaps, dragging a hand through his hair.

“Natt…”

“Shut up! I’m no saint, but what the hell are you doing?! You protect your brother from this kind of shit, and now look at you!”

“I was told I just had to take the item from the car and deliver it,” Norawit says, running a hand through his damp hair.

“Who told you that? What are you talking about? Who were you working for?!”

“It’s complicated. I don’t even know how to explain it properly. I need to deliver this to the owner first, then I’ll try to explain everything,” Norawit says, nodding toward the backpack.

“Explain it now, damn it! I—” Nattawat cuts himself off, biting his lip. “I knew it. I felt it in my gut that you were in deep shit, and I chased your phone halfway to hell. And for what, if you can’t even tell me what’s going on?! I almost got shot!”

“Nattawat, let’s talk later—”

“No! Tell me. I want to know.”

Norawit unbuckles his seatbelt and suddenly leans forward, grabbing Nattawat by the shirt and crashing their lips together.

Nattawat growls in frustration, but immediately kisses him back with a deep, heated moan. He’s furious, confused, scared out of his mind, but the second those lips press against his like that, all the anger dissolves in seconds, like it was never there at all.

Emotion flips instantly. Now he’s kissing him just as desperately, heart racing, adrenaline only making it worse. Nattawat fumbles for his seatbelt and unclips it, pulling closer, fingers threading into Norawit’s hair. He doesn’t pull away for a second, like missing even one moment would suffocate him.

Everything ignites between them again, sparks flying everywhere. It’s unreal, a storm that only burns hotter each time. The passion that exploded between them demands release, especially when their tongues tangle so wildly, so desperately.

Norawit finally breaks the kiss, breathless, their faces inches apart. He watches Nattawat’s lashes brush his skin as he blinks slowly, smells his hair, feels his warm breath against his lips, and barely restrains a groan.

“Alright,” Nattawat whispers, hand sliding to his neck. “You found the right way to calm me down.”

“Thank you,” Norawit murmurs. “Really. You saved me. But not now.”

“Norawit Titicharoenrak, you soothed my anger and lit something else on fire. Do you even realize what you’ve done?”

“So what do we do now?” Norawit smirks.

Nattawat pushes him back into the seat and climbs over him. It’s awkward, cramped, and neither of them cares. He settles over his hips and kisses him again, wild and hungry, like his life depends on it. Their breathing fills the car, hearts pounding in perfect sync.

Norawit’s hands slide possessively over his strong thighs, gripping hard and pulling a low moan from him. Nattawat bites his lower lip, tugging gently as he grinds against him, demanding more. Warm fingers obey without question, slipping under his shirt, tracing hot skin — waist, ribs, broad chest — brushing sensitive nipples before sliding lower.

Norawit pulls his shirt off and breaks from his lips, covering his trembling chest and neck with messy, desperate kisses. He knows exactly where he’s sensitive now — that spot between shoulder and ear. He reclines the seat, and Nattawat rubs against him through denim, lips parting as he moans softly.

Norawit shrugs off his hoodie, shivering when Nattawat’s hands glide down his chest and stomach. Nattawat notices faint bruises on his sides and touches them gently, understanding now why Norawit disappeared. He exhales softly and kisses him like forgiveness.

His fingers trace the sharp V of his hips, eyes dark with desire, and his movements grow faster, needier, moans spilling freely. He stops holding back, surrendering completely to the madness between them.

And it’s still not enough.

He wants everything, wants them to erase every last boundary and fall completely into the bliss waiting just beyond.

"Natt," Norawit whispers, his breath ragged as he pulls him closer by the neck.

"Shut up. I don't want to stop," Nattawat says and kisses him.

He's grinding against him so hard that any longer and they'll both finish without even touching each other. Titicharoenrak inhales sharply and squeezes his ass firmly. Nattawat breaks the kiss and moans, eyes closed, savoring the wild desire building inside him. It aches in his muscles, like his body craves this damn Norawit Titicharoenrak as much as air.

"No. I just wanted to say I've been dreaming about fucking you in this Mustang since the moment you stole my gas," the guy smirks, lips tracing his jawline.

"Like bad boys?" Nattawat whispers with a grin as he undoes his belt. "Didn't you say you don't sleep with guys like me?"

"I'd sleep with you even if you were a serial killer."

Norawit groans deeply as the guy's hand wraps around his cock, stroking it a few times, exposing the head. Nattawat grabs his face roughly and kisses him boldly, tongue sliding across his lips. Their desire is so intense they're both suffocating. It's madness or obsession. Their brains stop functioning, and all that matters is the burning desire deep within their bodies.

He needs release, and if they don't help each other now, this feeling will tear them apart. Titicharoenrak watches as Nattawat spits into his palm and starts stroking his cock slowly, gazing into his eyes. He keeps grinding, and it's obvious his own cock is straining against his clothes. That look, the same one he devoured him with at the club, makes everything inside him tremble. It feels so good to be wanted this badly by him.

As the guy's hand speeds up on his cock, Norawit keeps kissing him. He completely forgets he was almost killed earlier, or that he has to return to reality and face Damian. All that matters now is Nattawat sitting on him. His soft moans, rapid breathing, burning eyes, and his unsatisfied desire for closeness. Each touch makes it harder to hold back.

Nattawat grips his cock perfectly, alternating speed and direction masterfully. Shivers run through his body as heat pools in his abdomen. Norawit grabs his throat, squeezing slightly, eyes dark with passion.

"Do it already, sexy, or I'll fuck you myself," Nattawat whispers, breathing heavily, and kisses him. Norawit smiles against his lips and rips open the button on his jeans.

Nattawat clumsily undresses and returns to his thighs, panting with desire. He grabs lube from the glove compartment, passes it to Norawit and watches as Titicharoenrak generously applies it to his cock, biting his lip in anticipation.

Nattawat adjusts himself and immediately feels slick fingers entering him. So torturously slow it sends heat through him like he's in hell. A moan of pleasure escapes his lips as he closes his eyes, enjoying the sensations. Each movement is careful and smooth, as if giving him time to adjust. This gentleness surprises him pleasantly, and he softly kisses the guy in thanks.

Every cell in his body screams with overwhelming emotions. He can't wait any longer. It feels like he's wanted this moment alone with Norawit for too long, and he has no strength left to wait another second. It's too agonizing.

Titicharoenrak seems to sense this and pulls him closer. He strokes his cock a few times and then guides it inside. Nattawat closes his eyes softly as he lowers himself down slowly, centimeter by centimeter. The way he fills and stretches him is so incredibly good that his vision darkens for a moment. All the agonizing waiting was worth this single moment, damn it.

Nattawat pushes him against the seat and palms his chest, continuing to sink down.

"Fuck, Titicharoenrak," Nattawat whispers, groaning deeply as he bites his lip hard.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" the guy asks, gently brushing his hair back from his face.

"Perfect."

"Took the words right out of my mouth," Norawit whispers with a smile.

Nattawat starts moving his hips slowly, like rocking on a swing. So smooth and gentle that Titicharoenrak wants to scream from this sweet torture. He needs more. Much more.

"What was that you were saying?" Nattawat smirks, looking down at him, and places his hands on his waist. "Moans, screams, your cock inside me."

"Damn," Norawit gasps as the guy starts riding his hips.

"Hot sex that'll make you ache all over tomorrow," he continues to whisper seductively, running his tongue over his lips.

"Exactly. Nothing less between us."

"Happy now that I said no that night? You wouldn't have remembered these sensations that are driving you crazy now by morning."

"You were worth the wait."

"Good boy," Nattawat smiles and traces his finger along Norawit’s chin.

Norawit grabs his face and kisses him. So hungrily, like he wants to devour him completely. Wet, tongue sliding across his lips, palate, teeth. Again and again colliding with his tongue, so unrestrained, like breaking free from chains. Like a switch inside him has been flipped, releasing all inhibitions. His palms start wandering chaotically over Nattawat’s hot body, briefly pausing at the most sensitive spots before gripping his hips as Natt starts bouncing faster.

There's a level of pleasure where your vision darkens and you forget how to breathe. It's more intoxicating than any drug or alcohol, and they reach it with barely any effort. As if they're perfectly made for each other. Isn't that madness? The rhythmic slaps of Nattawat’s body against Titicharoenrak’s thighs fill the Mustang, along with rough moans, heavy breathing, and the slight creak of the seat. The windows start fogging up from the heat. The air is thick with their crazy chemistry, like everything could explode from the sparks around them. The scent of skin smelling like watermelon mixes with the scent of hair that leaves a trail of blooming cherry, creating an incredible combination. Their scent, when they're one entity.

Nattawat starts moving faster, feeling like he's about to explode. Norawit lifts his hips to meet him, intensifying each collision. He's gripping the skin on his legs so hard it's slightly painful, but neither of them cares. Nattawat licks his dry lips and in the dim light looks at the tattoo on his ribs. It looks perfect despite still healing. He traces it gently with his fingertips, feeling the slightly rough texture in places. It's satisfying to know he's the one who left this permanent mark on his body.

Norawit grips his swollen cock when he slows down, running his thumb across the wet head, smearing the beads of pre-cum. The guy responds with a hoarse moan and cries out as he

starts stroking his entire length with his fist, stimulating him from all angles.

Nattawat lets out a soft cry as he smoothly moves his hips back and forth, taking Norawit's cock to the hilt. He braces his hand against the seat, trying to find support. White spots flash before his eyes, and an euphoria so intense fills his body from head to toe that he feels like he might pass out at any moment.

"Baby," Titicharoenrak whispers with a deep moan, "you look so damn good on me. Could watch this forever."

"Shut the fuck up and just watch silently. Don't distract me from having you," Nattawat smugly grins as he pushes his sweaty hair back from his forehead.

Norawit smiles and runs his hand over his perfect body. His abs are beautifully defined - just right. He's trained and sculpted, but his waist is so slim it seems like you could wrap one hand around it effortlessly. His chest and shoulders are broad and firm, yet his skin is soft and velvety. The scattering of tattoos only adds to his rebellious edge and suits him perfectly. Only now does he notice the small bar in his right nipple, brushing it with his fingers, and sighs heavily at the realization of just how hot this guy is, damn it. And he belongs to him right now.

A timer goes off in the car, the one Titicharoenrak had set, and he squeezes his eyes shut, continuing to bring Nattawat to orgasm. He has twenty minutes to get to the warehouse. If he's late—he's dead, but right now he couldn't care less. If he stops now, something will kill him faster and much more painfully.

Nattawat changes his rhythm again, feeling an atomic explosion building inside him, and starts riding his cock rapidly. He's struggling to breathe, suffocating from the stuffy car and his own desire that's literally burning him alive. He leans toward Titicharoenrak, running his hand through his brown hair, pushing it back, and sighs tiredly against his lips. His back is aching terribly from the awkward position, but he keeps moving rhythmically.

Norawit grips his sweat-covered waist tightly and starts thrusting into him roughly, meeting his movements with his hips. Nattawat cries out softly again and again, gripping his hair and the edge of the seat tightly.

"Just a little more, damn," escapes his lips with a moan. "Come on."

"Unbelievable, Natt. You're so damn hot, you know that?" Titicharoenrak smirks, breathing heavily. "Should've agreed to this when you were seducing me in the first ten minutes after we met."

"Shut up, god."

"But I'm right though. Look how perfect we are together. You still gonna deny that we were destined to meet and fuck long and happily?"

"One more word and I'll punch you. Seriously, shut up. You're distracting me," Nattawat whispers, moaning deeply as he closes his eyes.

"Weakling. Do you need silence to concentrate? I could come just from these delicious sounds you're making in my ear. Keep going, I love it. You're so weak and vulnerable when I'm inside you."

"Fuck you, next time I'll gag you so you can't talk at all," Nattawat smiles.

"BDSM games? Not really my thing, baby. But for you, I'll try. Flogging? Handcuffs? Spreader bars? Rope bondage? My imagination is limitless."

"You drive me crazy."

"And you're not much of a talker during it, are you?"

Nattawat raises his hand to strike but instead roughly grabs his jaw, holding his face in place, and smiles wickedly.

"Next time I'll find a better use for that pretty mouth of yours," he says and silences him with a forceful kiss.

"That'll only shut me up for so long."

Titicharoenrak's phone goes off again just as he comes with a moan that sounds more like a low growl. Nattawat spills onto his stomach a few seconds later and sighs heavily as if he's just run the craziest marathon of his life. He collapses exhausted onto him, trying to catch his breath. A tingling wave of pleasure washes over his entire body, bringing such wild relief. Despite feeling completely drained, he has the sensation of incredible euphoria filling him like an empty vessel.

"Damn..." he whispers, struggling to breathe. "What... what was that?"

"Insane, right?" Norawit chuckles softly, running his fingers through his hair and licking his dry lips.

"Beyond that."

"Just 'perfect chemistry'," Titicharoenrak says with a smug grin.

"What?" Nattawat raises an eyebrow.

"What's happening between us—it's the combination of all the important building blocks you listed, isn't it? This was one of them—'perfect chemistry'."

"You're just high from ridiculously good sex with me. Clouded judgment?"

"Stop denying the obvious. Just admit it, we're a perfect match. Made for each other."

"Yeah. We're perfect on exactly one out of four points," Nattawat smiles.

"I'll work on the rest later. And by the way, your dick isn't the size of my pinky. I'm satisfied."

"God, I hate you," Nattawat laughs.

"Don't say that to your boyfriend."

"Oh, so I'm your boyfriend now?"

"Yes."

"You're not my boyfriend. Fuck off."

"Don't resist. You'll want it soon enough," Titicharoenrak says.

"Don't flatter yourself, idiot. I don't date and I don't get attached."

Norawit rolls his eyes and fumbles for his phone on the floor, which had fallen out of his hoodie pocket and has been vibrating insistently for several minutes. The unknown number on the screen quickly brings him back to reality, and he sighs heavily, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Nattawat climbs back to his seat and starts straightening himself out.

"Speaking," Titicharoenrak says, panting.

"By my calculations, you should be close to your destination by now. I hope that's the case?" Lim asks.

"I'll be there soon. Ran into some complications."

"I don't care about that."

"I've got the backpack. I'm on my way."

"You have ten minutes," the man says roughly and hangs up.

Nattawat, pulling on his clothes, looks at him suspiciously and raises an eyebrow questioningly.

"Everything's fine," the guy answers his unspoken question, zipping up his pants.

"Sure?"

"Yeah, but I need your help again."

"Of course. I'm already an accomplice anyway," he says sarcastically.

"Seriously, can we get to the industrial area in Vermont Vista from here in ten minutes?" Norawit asks, putting on his hoodie.

"We can do it in seven," Nattawat says and smiles.

Chapter 5: V

Just as Nattawat had said, they reach their destination quickly. Watching the sparse streetlights flicker past along the roadside, Norawit immediately recognizes the dimly lit street in the Vermont Vista industrial zone. It's just as eerie as it was last time. Empty. Almost no people, barely any cars. Around the bend lies the same parking lot, and across from it — Damian's warehouse, where his underground office for shadow business is hidden.

He really did make it. Unbelievable.

There are only three minutes left on the timer.

Thanks to Nattawat and his insane driving skills, Norawit is still alive, and the damn job is technically done. If it weren't for that unhinged racer, he would've either been shot or simply had the backpack taken from him.

Norawit hadn't expected his help tonight at all, but he's genuinely grateful that Nattawat showed up at exactly the right moment. It was dramatic, cinematic, even, like in movies where the hero appears just in time during a major crisis. Except none of this was fiction. The bullets fired at them were real. The chase wasn't staged. And now he still has to face another meeting with the main villain, one who's very real and very far from cinematic.

"Stop here," Norawit says quietly, giving Nattawat a light tap on the thigh.

"Here?" Nattawat asks, glancing around.

"Yes."

"On some sketchy street in the middle of nowhere?"

"It's better if they don't know you gave me a ride."

Nattawat smirks. "What, worried about me?"

"Yes," Norawit answers seriously. "Neither of us knows who those people are. I don't want to drag you into this shit. These are North's problems, and mine."

"I have no idea who you're even talking about," Nattawat says, pulling over to the curb and turning to face him. "And I'm still waiting for an explanation."

"I know. Wait here for me. I'll come back and explain everything."

"Fine," Nattawat sighs, shrugging. "Like I have other options."

"If I don't come back in twenty minutes, leave and call the cops."

“You’re not joking, are you?”

“Not at all,” Norawit says, about to get out.

“What did you get yourself into, Titicharoenrak?” Nattawat asks quietly, grabbing his wrist.

Norawit exhales heavily, his gaze dropping to the fingers wrapped around his skin — firm, yet gentle. Nattawat’s grip is careful, as if he’s afraid to let go. His brown eyes are full of worry and concern, saying far more than he does out loud. He rushed to help when he didn’t have to. And he’s still helping now, without demanding answers.

He probably deserves at least some truth.

“My brother owes a lot of money,” Norawit says. “If he doesn’t pay it back or work it off, they’ll pin the Vermont Vista fire on him.” His fingers slide along Nattawat’s forearm, stroking softly — a silent thank-you for caring.

“What the—”

“Yeah. It’s bad,” Norawit nods.

“So you have to help him,” Nattawat says slowly.

“Exactly.”

“Did he start the fire?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t get it,” Nattawat frowns, brows knitting together.

“He was set up,” Norawit answers, taking a deep breath.

“Fuck,” Nattawat whispers, grasping how trapped the situation really is. “Can I do anything? Help somehow?”

“Yes. Wait for me. And take me home after.”

Nattawat sighs, rolling his eyes as Norawit grabs the backpack. He needs to reach the warehouse fast — it would be stupid to be late when he actually made it on time. He steps out of the car and heads in the right direction, but after a few steps, he suddenly stops.

He exhales heavily, checking the time, then looks back at the car.

For reasons he can’t quite explain, something inside him tugs at invisible strings, refusing to let him just walk away.

He doesn’t know what awaits him when he sees Damian again — but it’s almost certainly nothing good. That man doesn’t joke around, and tonight’s job was dangerously close to being a failure. Damian won’t like that.

Norawit takes several deep breaths, standing there like an idiot between the car and the path to the warehouse, glancing back and forth while mentally counting the remaining seconds. A bad feeling settles in his chest. The man who had him at gunpoint saw Nattawat. What if that matters later? What if they remember him and come looking?

And that would be entirely Norawit's fault.

But without that charming Mustang driver, the one who could glide through sharp turns like a dream, he never would've managed alone.

Inside the car, Nattawat taps his fingers anxiously against the steering wheel, leaning back with a deep sigh. He hates not understanding things in his life, and right now, everything about Norawit is one massive question mark — and it's driving him insane. He doesn't even fully understand why it bothers him this much.

It's just a guy. Yes — ridiculously handsome, charming, someone he enjoys spending time with. But still, just a guy.

So why was he so scared when he realized Norawit was in trouble?

Instead of going back to sleep, he couldn't sit still — and that's how he ended up here. Stupid.

He startles when Norawit's face suddenly appears outside the driver's window. The scent of his cologne instantly fills the space, and Nattawat exhales softly, lips parting. Norawit gently takes his chin, pulling him closer, and kisses him. Nattawat blinks in surprise, then melts into it, closing his eyes.

Norawit slips his tongue into his mouth boldly, without asking permission, and a shiver runs straight down Nattawat's spine. It's strange, like they hadn't already done far more intimate things just ten minutes ago. Norawit pulls back just as suddenly, smiling faintly as he exhales, relieved, as if he needed that kiss to survive.

"I thought you'd already left."

"Please stay here," Norawit whispers.

"You came back just to tell me not to move?" Nattawat smirks.

"Yes," Norawit replies, kissing him again — short and soft this time.

"And you think I'll actually listen?"

"Recklessness isn't helpful right now. Don't come after me. If I don't return — leave."

"And if I don't save you, who will?" Nattawat murmurs, worry thick in his voice as he studies Norawit's face so close to his own.

"Natt," Norawit exhales quietly, shaking his head. "You've already helped me more than enough tonight."

“Come back without bullet holes — and nobody gets hurt. But if they mess up your pretty face, I can’t promise I’ll behave,” Nattawat says with a grin, brushing his fingers along Norawit’s cheek before flicking his chin lightly.

“Idiot.”

“And that’s coming from you?”

Norawit kisses him once more, smiles, and walks away without looking back. Time is running out, there’s no point delaying the inevitable. He just has to face it, at least until he finds a way out.

He’s let through without any trouble to the familiar staircase at the end of the warehouse corridor and soon stands before the massive door again. Looks like Lim really was expecting him. None of the guard dogs even bother checking him for weapons, or anything else. Maybe Damian simply isn’t afraid of anything.

A guard in a sharp suit opens the door and gestures for him to follow. He leads Norawit past the room of monitors and through another door Norawit hadn’t noticed during his last visit.

After a few steps, it becomes clear.

This is the enemy’s lair.

Damian’s office.

The large room is steeped entirely in dark tones, lit only by artificial light and designed in the same style as the neighboring space with the poker table. The difference is that here there is nothing excessive—no details that hint at entertainment of any kind. A few shelves lined with collectible figurines and several cabinets run along the walls, and it’s almost unsettling to imagine what might be stored inside them. At the far end stands a mahogany desk paired with a leather chair, and there is no other furniture at all. Which means only one person ever sits in this room—its owner. A strange choice for an office.

Overall, the atmosphere here is restrained and businesslike. It smells of expensive alcohol, like an elite bar, with just a faint undertone of chemicals. This is clearly where Lim issues orders and controls his illegal operations. His main office is located in a sleek business center about twenty minutes from Vermont Vista. Funny, really—here he hides like some Lucky Luciano in a mafia den. At any other time, though, he’s easy to find in a downtown tower among dozens of other skyscrapers. There, he seems like a completely different person. If people only knew what this man truly does, his face would appear far less often in local newspapers.

Titicharoenrak stops in the middle of the office and lifts his gaze to Damian, raising his chin with quiet pride. Damian lounges behind the desk, legs casually propped up on its surface, leaning back in a chair that resembles a royal throne. Beside him sits a sleek Doberman,

perfectly straight, a chain in place of a collar. The dog twitches its nose, catching the scent of the visitor, then fixes him with dark, piercing eyes. A pretty dog—terrifying as hell.

Damian himself slowly drags an arrogant, searing gaze over Titicharoenrak from head to toe, taking an unhurried sip of alcohol from a small glass. His eyebrow lifts in surprise when he notices the backpack in Titicharoenrak's hands. Clearly, he hadn't expected him to actually retrieve it, and now he's pleasantly impressed.

"Norawit Titicharoenrak," Lim drawls in a slow, velvety voice, watching the sand slip through the hourglass on his desk. "You were almost late. But you made it."

"Did I even have a chance to be late?" Titicharoenrak smirks, watching the final grain fall.

"Of course not. Your knees are too valuable," Damian laughs venomously and sits upright.

"You gave me enough time. I just ran into complications. I had to lie low to make sure your backpack arrived intact. Even if I had been late, I still would've come. Coming back to you without it would've been the same as a death sentence."

"You understand the nature of our relationship perfectly. I like responsible people. I already like you."

"And I don't like you."

"You don't like anyone. It would be strange to hear otherwise," Damian replies calmly. "How was the job?"

"Are you serious?"

"Just a little," Damian chuckles.

He snaps his long fingers and gestures to the guards. The backpack is immediately taken from Titicharoenrak by a young man and placed on the desk in front of his boss before the guard steps aside. Lim hums in satisfaction, drains his glass, and continues studying his guest. From the pleased look on his face, it's obvious he hadn't expected success, but now he's clearly satisfied with his new pet.

"You said there were difficulties. Explain."

"The owner of the Nissan and his friends chased me. They were armed."

"And how did you manage to get away?"

"I had to run. Weaving through the streets, ditched the bike, and escaped on foot while they circled nearby. It was the first thing that came to mind. The alleys were too narrow, no car could get through."

"Very clever," Damian smiles, nodding several times.

"I've never complained about my brain," Norawit replies with a careless shrug.

“I should’ve considered the kind of people living in that area. I should’ve given you a gun,” Lim says thoughtfully, rubbing his sharp chin.

“Or sent one of your chained dogs instead.”

“You are one of my dogs now. Did you forget?” Damian smirks, arching a brow.

“I’m not here for long. You’ll get what you’re owed, and then you can go to hell.”

“Very confident. Bold words, considering your freedom is as far away as the moon on foot.”

“You promised North,” Titicharoenrak says warily, fists clenching despite himself.

“Relax, hero. If I promise something, I deliver. By the way, a little bird told me you were saved from a bullet to the forehead today. Did someone help you complete my task?”

“And if they did?” Norawit counters coolly. “Why does that matter? Your backpack is right there, and I arrived on time.”

“I was testing whether you’d lie to me. Honesty is a quality I value highly.”

“And how honest are you with me?” Titicharoenrak asks, lifting a brow.

“And who helped you?” Lim repeats, ignoring the question.

“Don’t drag other people into this. These are our accounts, and I’m not backing out of them,” Norawit says firmly.

Damian studies him for a long moment, his cold gaze sharp and probing, as if trying to peel back every secret. Titicharoenrak wishes he knew what was going through his mind as those ice-cold eyes scan him like prey. What drives people like this? Cruelty? Money? Impunity? Or all of it together? Who gave him the right to decide over other people’s lives?

There’s something deeply unsettling about this man’s presence. On the surface he looks normal, but the moment he looks at you like this, or speaks in that low, threatening tone, a chill crawls down your spine. He’s like the quietest yet most dangerous predator of all. Graceful and proud, like a jaguar, but one that doesn’t just mesmerize you, it devours you whole. The energy rolling off him is feral. He takes revenge slowly and calmly, and those are the enemies you should fear most. You never know what’s going on inside their heads. Outward indifference coexists easily with a boiling hatred for everything alive beneath the surface. Like a sleeping volcano, ready to erupt at any second and reveal its true power.

He must be hiding more than a few dirty secrets. How else could someone so young build such an empire? And on top of that, his “other” line of work, about which almost nothing is known.

“Alright. You’re right,” Damian finally says, opening the backpack. “It’s none of my business. You completed the task, that’s all I care about. Want to see what you risked your life for today?”

“I’m guessing drugs or weapons,” Norawit replies indifferently.

“You think I’m that predictable?” Damian laughs sharply.

“You told me to avoid the police. I’m drawing logical conclusions.”

“Yes. You’d definitely have had problems if they found this on you. The police would’ve had a lot of questions, because they wouldn’t even understand what they were looking at,” Lim says calmly.

Titicharoenrak watches him with confusion and growing curiosity. So it’s not drugs. Not weapons. Then what the hell did he force him to steal?

Damian carelessly dumps the contents of the backpack onto the desk, shoves aside anything unnecessary, letting it fall to the floor, and searches for what he wants.

“There you are, my precious,” he murmurs with satisfaction, lifting a small box labeled Lim Industries.

He opens it, and a delighted smile spreads across his face, like a child receiving a Christmas present. He exhales in relief and inspects the contents closely under the desk lamp. Inside lies a strange device: a small, round chip slightly larger than a pea, with several thin silver filaments dangling from it like wires.

What the hell is this?

He carefully picks it up and activates it with a light press. A red light immediately flares on the chip, and the wire-like branches twitch as if a powerful current surges through them.

“What is that?” Norawit asks warily, frowning.

“One of my latest developments. Working name: Blast,” Damian replies proudly, still examining it for damage. “Some idiot stole it from my downtown lab.”

“So it really was yours. You didn’t lie.”

“Of course not.”

“Why steal it?” Norawit asks, surprised.

“Probably wanted to sell it. A toy like this can cause a lot of damage, and is worth millions,” Damian says with a mysterious smile.

“And who buys something like that?” Titicharoenrak scoffs.

“You’re better off not knowing,” Lim replies calmly.

Of course. Terrorists, just like Earl said. Shit. Does his company really manufacture weapons for people like that? Officially, they’re for special services and the military, but what if the authorities don’t know? What if he’s making money off criminal organizations?

“How does it even work?” Norawit asks despite himself.

“A complex device designed to simulate and influence neurons in the human brain. A lot is built into this little thing, but the key element is a powerful radio transmitter. The active party can send a signal to the executor from almost anywhere in the world.”

“What the fuck? Is that even real? That sounds like science fiction.”

“I created it myself. Tested earlier models. This one’s advantage is self-protection.”

“Self-protection?”

“This filament anchors itself to a major artery,” Damian explains, carefully bringing his pinky close to the tendrils. “A brilliant upgrade. It’s easily implanted through a small incision and holds firmly.”

One of the filaments suddenly comes alive, coiling around his finger. Titicharoenrak stares, wide-eyed, and exhales quietly. He’s never seen anything like this in his life. It’s insane—this thing reacts to living tissue. How is that even possible?

“And how do you remove it, if necessary?” Norawit asks.

“You don’t,” Lim smirks. “That’s the beauty of it.”

“Why not?”

“Removal kills the host.”

“The host?” Titicharoenrak freezes. “You mean people carry this inside them? What the hell?”

“You’re asking too many questions, Norawit Titicharoenrak. I’ve already told you more than enough. This information is classified. Breathe a word of it to anyone, and I’ll feed your liver to my dog,” Damian says lightly, smiling as he places the device back into the box.

So this is his shadow business. Weapons. Surveillance tech. Something even worse. Sold into the wrong hands. Now it’s obvious how he built his fortune. You’d have to be an idiot not to see the connections. Devices like Blast could be used for forced recruitment, for example. He said it himself, signals sent from anywhere in the world to the executor. There’s only one way to interpret that.

They use this on people. Against their will.

Norawit isn’t surprised that Damian is involved in something like this, but he is shocked that such things actually exist.

Suddenly Lim gestures for him to step aside, snapping him out of his thoughts, and nods briefly at the guard. Frowning in confusion, Titicharoenrak obeys and moves to the wall without asking questions. Seconds later, the guards bring two men into the office, gripping them by the arms, and something inside Norawit tightens with fear.

Shit. It's them. The ones who chased him.

What the hell is going on? Why are they here? How were they found? Were they being tracked?

Damian stands, slowly removes his black jacket, and rolls his shirt sleeves up to his elbows, as if preparing for something unpleasant. Norawit's mouth goes dry with a sinking feeling. They're not here by accident. This is no coincidence.

Damian steps around the desk and leans back against it, folding his arms over his chest. The icy look in his eyes makes one thing painfully clear:

These men are dead.

"So," Lim says with open disgust, looking at them one by one, "this is what the two rats I lost track of look like. Tsk. Ethan Brown. Han Yaozu. Naughty boys."

The men exchange a quick glance, clearly shocked that he knows their names, and visibly tense.

"Surprised? Of course you are. Before starting a war, one should study their enemy. A well-known strategy, might've even helped you win. Although…" Damian tilts his head slightly. "You were never meant to beat me on the same field. Did you forget who you were dealing with? I know everything about both of you. Where you live. Who you live with. What you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Even how many times a day each of you shits in your filthy trailers while getting high."

"What the hell are we doing here? I don't understand," Yaozu says, his voice shaking.

"Are you always this stupid, or is fear just making it worse?" Damian snaps coldly. "Pull your head out of your ass and look around. You're in my office, which means you're in serious trouble. Do you recognize anyone here besides me?"

"I don't know him," Yaozu says, nodding toward Titicharoenrak.

"Shut up, Han. You know him perfectly well, you nearly shot him today."

So one of the men from the blue car is Han Yaozu. And the other one isn't here. Probably because he's already dead. Fuck.

Norawit watches the scene unfold, barely breathing, his own heartbeat pounding so loudly it feels like it's lodged in his throat. Another second and he might cough it up onto the expensive carpet. His thoughts spin wildly, gears clicking into place, the only way Lim's dogs could have tracked them was by following them from the very beginning. Which means they were following him too.

Had everything been planned in advance? Was he nothing more than bait — used to lure them out the moment he stole that damn backpack?

“When they chased you, we finally managed to track them down,” Damian says, as if reading his thoughts, casting Norawit a brief glance. “Good job. Those two assholes ran from me across cities for two weeks. One of them was preparing fake documents to flee the country. I couldn’t allow that.”

“I don’t understand,” Titicharoenrak says slowly, shaking his head. “So… what you’re saying is—”

“Yes. I used you to flush them out. If I’d sent one of my men, they would’ve recognized him. Those thugs all look the same, for fuck’s sake. I needed someone unfamiliar. Someone who wouldn’t freeze under pressure. You were new to them, and you look exactly like the kind of petty thief or useless drifter they’d never suspect. If those idiots were even a little smarter, they wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

“But why me?” Norawit asks. “Why not send someone more reliable?”

“You’re expendable,” Damian answers indifferently, shrugging. “If you’d been killed, I would’ve lost nothing but a work resource.”

“Fair enough,” Norawit murmurs, exhaling heavily.

“Risking trusted people is stupid. I need them. I don’t fully trust you, and I don’t know your full potential, but you’re easy to manipulate. You’d do anything for your brother. That much was obvious, and I used it. And you’re a damn good driver, as it turns out. I’m satisfied with you.”
His gaze shifts to the other two men, turning icy. “But you?” His voice sharpens, venomous. “I’m disappointed.”

“Damian, I can explain,” Ethan says quietly.

“Search,” Lim orders suddenly, pulling something out of the backpack and handing it to the dog without taking his predatory eyes off his victims.

The dog obediently sniffs the object, then trots over to the driver of the Nissan, sits in front of him, and barks several times.

“Stay,” Damian says. The dog sits back down. “Good boy, Wan. So it was you.”

“What do you want from us?” Brown asks.

“You,” Lim nods at Han, “step aside. We’ll talk later.”

Han obeys, swallowing hard. The atmosphere in the room grows so heavy it feels impossible to breathe. The air turns sharp, almost painful with every inhale. Tension coils between them all, thick and suffocating. Damian’s glare lashes the two men like lightning, and their fear is so palpable Norawit feels it seep into his own bones.

He feels helpless. Doomed.
He wasn’t just used — he was used twice. And he walked straight into it willingly, all to protect his brother.

“I’ll explain everything,” Ethan whispers, dropping to his knees.

“To hell with your explanations,” Lim scoffs. “I don’t give a shit. It’s all clear to me. You broke into my lab and stole my property. Do you even understand who you tried to steal from?”

“Yes, but I—”

“Not interested. Not even a little.”
He turns to Norawit. “This one owns the Nissan, right?”

“He ran out of the trailer next door and was driving,” Norawit answers.

“I should punish you properly first, you filthy rat,” Damian says, taking a loaded gun from a guard. “But I don’t want to dirty my hands. I’m extremely squeamish when it comes to trash like you. You’ve wasted far too much of my time, and that’s unacceptable.”

He raises the gun and points it at Ethan’s head, stepping closer. Ethan throws his hands up, choking on panicked apologies.

Norawit stares in horror, eyes wide, breath caught in his chest. He knows what’s coming.

Is this really worth a human life?
He gave the device back — does that mean nothing?

“Wait,” Norawit says quietly. “Is this really necessary? It’s just an object. You got it back. Punish him if you must, but why kill him?”

“Just an object?” Damian smirks, then suddenly swings the gun toward Norawit.

Norawit freezes, hands shooting up, heart racing so violently his vision darkens.

“Just an object?!” Lim snarls. “That ‘object’ is worth millions. I created it. No one gets to do this to me. Or do I look like a fool to you?”

“No,” Norawit whispers, breathing fast. “That’s not what I meant. Killing him for this, you have your device. Why?”

“What would you suggest?” Damian asks calmly. “Punishment? In the old days, thieves had their hands cut off. Repeat offenders were executed. Should we honor tradition?”

“No, but—”

“Creatures like him only understand their own language. Life is for the strong. That’s how this world works. The weak exist to feed the strong. That’s nature. The food chain is built on it. You know this — you’re one of the strong. Don’t try to be fair and kind to everyone, or you’ll become prey. Respect belongs only to those who can defend themselves.”

There’s something strange in his eyes — something almost like sadness, as if no other worldview ever existed for him.

Norawit nods faintly, exhaling in relief as Damian lowers the gun back toward Ethan.

God. He could've killed him.

"Damian, I… I'm sorry," Brown sobs. "Please—"

"Shut your filthy mouth. Buyer's name," Lim barks.

"There isn't one! I didn't sell it, I was planning my escape!"

"Are you sure?" Damian asks, clicking the safety off.

"Yes, I swear," Ethan nods frantically.

"For clarity, I'll ask again."
Damian grabs his face and jams the gun into his mouth.

"Buyer's name," he repeats coldly. "Or you'll choke on lead."

Ethan shakes his head through tears. Damian pulls the gun away.

"I needed the money," Ethan whispers. "I thought I could sell it fast."

"Oh," Lim hums, feigning sympathy. "So you needed money?"

"Yes. I'm broke. I'm about to be evicted. I was hiding from you on my last cash."

"I understand," Damian says softly. "You were desperate. You wanted to survive."
He nods. "Alright. Since you swear and apologize so sincerely. The important thing is that you didn't sell it."

"Really?" Ethan asks hopefully. "You forgive me?"

"No."

He shoots him in the head without hesitation.

Norawit flinches hard, squeezing his eyes shut as the echo of the gunshot rings in his ears. He hates that sound. Always has. Even in movies he covers his ears.

When he opens his eyes, Ethan's body lies motionless on the floor.

Damian killed him as easily as breathing.

"For crossing me," Norawit thinks numbly.

"Now you," Damian says, aiming the gun at Han.

"I didn't steal anything!" Yaozu blurts. "It was his idea. I just helped today. I didn't know it was yours!"

“Fucking coward,” Lim sneers. “Easy to blame your dead friend. Don’t piss yourself, my carpet costs more than three of your kidneys on the black market. You won’t die today. You have a job.”

“What job?” Yaozu whispers.

“You go back to your rat nest and tell everyone what happens to those who cross me. Try this again and I’ll cut off all supply. I’ll make every last one of you choke to death. I won’t care who’s guilty. I’ll destroy all of you. Flatten your trailer park. Crush its people like flies. Stay out of my sight. Clear?”

“Yes,” Yaozu croaks. “I’ll tell them.”

“For emphasis,” Damian says, and shoots him twice.

Han collapses screaming, blood soaking the floor.

Damian hands the gun back, wipes blood from his hand with a white handkerchief, grimacing.

“Damn it. Ruined a new shirt,” he mutters. “Get them out. The noise is irritating.”

As if bodies were nothing more than trash.

Norawit stares at the bloodstains, shaking.
This was a warning. For him.

“You’re still mine,” Damian says casually. “And we’re not done.”

“I’m… not?” Norawit whispers.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Damian laughs. “I won’t kill you. I have a proposal.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“Your brother is paying off his debt far too slowly,” Damian continues calmly. “The more spectacular the fight, the longer it takes him to recover afterward. My guests don’t like that. So I thought I might offer you something.”

“I’m not a fighter like him,” Norawit says immediately. “I can’t do what he does. Sorry.”

“I don’t need that,” Damian replies coolly. “That’s what Cerberus is still for. I may not be earning as quickly from him now, but he’s unmatched at what he does. I haven’t found a replacement yet.”

“His name is North,” Norawit snaps irritably.

“I keep forgetting.”

“So what exactly is your offer?”

“I want you to take part in a race,” Lim says, settling back into his chair and absently stroking the dog’s head.

“That’s it?” Norawit asks, surprised.

“Yes. Naturally, you’ll be driving a car. But as far as I know, that won’t be a problem. You have experience.”

“I’m not that good,” Norawit says honestly, shaking his head. “I know my limits. If it were motorcycles, I wouldn’t hesitate. But cars…” He shrugs. “I can’t even win on a track.”

“You’ll have time to prepare,” Damian says, watching him closely. “You’ll remember your skills. Polish them.”

“And the catch?”

“There is none,” Lim replies indifferently, tapping his fingers on the desk. “I’m placing a large bet on you. If you win, I triple my money. That suits me just fine. You won’t receive the prize money, I will, but will the title of Powerslide’s best driver satisfy you? And more importantly, you’ll free yourself and your brother from the debt forever. I’ll let you both go.”

“Powerslide?”

“A three-stage race. One rule only.”

“Which is?”

“Reach the finish line,” Damian answers with a cryptic smile.

“Can I think about it?” Norawit asks. “I need to assess whether I can even attempt this.”

“Of course. Just not for too long. Only those who pass the first stage receive an invitation to Powerslide. And once you pass, there’s no turning back. You’ll get your chance to test yourself.”

“And if I don’t make it past selection?”

“Well,” Lim spreads his hands, “then our little deal is off.”

“When is the first stage?”

“In about a month. I’ll give you the exact details.”

“Alright,” Norawit says quietly. “I’ll think about it.”

“Do that. And don’t forget, you’re still my dog. Stay in touch. I may need you soon,” Damian adds, waving his hand dismissively. “You’re free.”

Norawit doesn’t linger. He leaves quickly, putting as much distance between himself and that place as possible.

He only stops once he turns the corner of the building. Pressing his back to the wall, he takes several deep breaths, trying to steady the tremor in his hands.

It's terrifying.
God, it's absolutely horrifying to watch someone die right in front of you.

He never planned to see something like that again, not after all these years. One gunshot to Ethan Brown's head ripped open wounds he thought had long since healed. And now he has no idea how to close them again. What kind of bandage could possibly ease his soul?

There's only one thing that ever helps him. One way he knows.

The entire walk to Nattawat's car, the images won't leave his head. Damian killed a man as calmly as if he were shooting at targets in a range. North was right, that piece of shit never jokes. They're in deep this time.

Does he even have a real choice, despite the illusion Damian offered? Hardly. Whether he wants to or not, he'll have to race, and try to win their freedom. The real question is why Damian is so willing to give it.

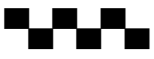
Norawit slides into the Mustang and exhales quietly, closing the door behind him. He stares through the windshield at the dark street, silent for several long seconds under a watchful gaze.

Nattawat studies him with concern, brows drawn together, then gently rests a hand on his thigh.

Norawit sighs heavily and looks at him. Nattawat tilts his head, silently asking.

"I need a drink," Norawit says quietly, running a hand through his hair. "Let's go to my place. And please, no lectures about my drinking. I really can't—"

"Whatever you say, Sexy," Nattawat smirks, starting the engine.



Titicharoenrak sat on the floor by the bed, in front of the coffee table, chewing through yet another slice of pizza and staring blankly ahead. Jirochtikul sat beside him, legs crossed,

eating takeout noodles. A movie played on the TV with the volume turned low, but neither of them was following the plot.

Even though it felt comfortable to sit like this together, spending the remaining hours before dawn in each other's company, a heavy tension lingered in the room. It wasn't between the two of them — it clung to everything happening in Norawit's life.

Just as he had promised, he told Nattawat everything. Everything except one thing: that he had witnessed a man being killed right in front of him, and why that moment had shattered him so deeply. He couldn't focus, couldn't taste the food. Even alcohol brought no relief. The weight of it all pressed down on him, mentally and physically.

Nattawat stayed beside him the entire time, digesting everything he'd heard. He watched Norawit drown his thoughts in beer, but felt no disgust. He understood him — again. He didn't try to stop him, didn't lecture him, because he could see how bad it was. Norawit was consumed with worry for his brother and fear for what would happen next, and in a way, numbing himself felt necessary. His fears made sense.

And yet… it felt like something more was eating him alive from the inside.

"So," Nattawat says quietly, frowning as he chews, "your brother owes two and a half million for drugs that were destroyed in a fire. And the one demanding repayment is Damian Lim — who probably set that fire himself."

"Yeah," Titicharoenrak nods, sighing heavily.

"And North is fighting in brutal underground matches on that psychopath's orders?"

"Mm-hm."

"And you were forced to steal some super-technology of his from a junkie in a trailer park."

"Exactly."

"And now you're both working for him until the debt is paid."

"Hearing it from you sounds even more pathetic than when I say it," Norawit mutters with a bitter smile.

"Is there really no legal way to deal with that bastard?" Nattawat asks, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's blatant blackmail. Yeah, he 'saved' North from prison, but he's the one who put him there in the first place. For fuck's sake, he's killed people, and no one can touch him? How is that even possible in the twenty-first century, in this country?"

"When you figure it out, let me know," Titicharoenrak replies, his voice slightly slurred.

Nattawat exhales slowly, looking at him. Norawit barely looks like himself. His gaze is empty as he stares at the TV, drinking constantly, absentmindedly stroking the cat curled in his lap. His delicate profile looks so painfully sad that Nattawat's chest tightens.

Fuck. Norawit is in serious trouble. The kind that doesn't have easy solutions. For now, all he can do is follow that man's orders, but who knows what he'll demand next? Today it was theft. Tomorrow it could be murder.

Something has to be done.

Nattawat sets his food aside and rakes a tired hand through his hair.

"Are you okay?" he asks quietly.

Norawit shakes his head, drains the last of his beer, and sets the empty bottle down among several others. He opens a new one.

Something is wrong. Nattawat can feel it. Maybe Norawit hasn't told him everything. Or maybe there's something else gnawing at him just as badly.

"Do you want to talk to me?"

"Depends on what you want to hear," Titicharoenrak replies.

"What's hurting you."

"My life hurts," Norawit scoffs bitterly. "It's shit."

"A lot of people feel that way," Nattawat says softly, watching him with sympathy.

"You too?"

"Me too," he answers quietly, slipping his fingers into Norawit's hair at the nape of his neck. "Talk to me. I can tell you didn't tell me everything. Something happened. You came back… different."

Norawit stays silent for several minutes, replaying the sound of the gunshot in his head, the way the man chasing him crumpled lifelessly to the floor. Nattawat doesn't rush him. He just waits, gently combing his fingers through his hair.

"What did you feel," Titicharoenrak asks suddenly, "when you found your mom on the bathroom floor?"

Nattawat's hand freezes.

He blinks a few times, completely unprepared for that question. It would be cruel in almost any other context — something that could easily push him over the edge. But not now. Not coming from Norawit.

He exhales softly, biting his lip, sinking back into that day, and resumes stroking his hair.

"Why are you asking?"

"A man was killed in front of me an hour ago."

“Who? How?”

“The one who tried to shoot us.”

“Damian…” Nattawat trails off, disbelief flooding his face. “Oh God.”

“Yeah.”

Nattawat goes quiet, trying to process it. He doesn’t mourn the man, he didn’t know him, but the fact that it happened right in front of Norawit, so recently, is horrifying.

Now everything makes sense: the drinking, the emptiness.

“It’s hard to explain,” Nattawat says softly, watching Norawit’s lashes brush his cheeks as he blinks. “I came home from school and immediately knew something was wrong. Everything looked the same — and yet it didn’t. Then I saw her hand in the doorway. And blood. The first thing I felt was fear. Pure, tearing fear. I’ve never been that scared before — not since. Then came desperation. Regret. I kept hoping she was alive, even when I touched her cold skin.”

“Did you try to save her?”

“Yes. The paramedics said she’d been dead long before they arrived. And I was there, trying to resuscitate her for nothing.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“Not as much, but…” he hesitates. “I don’t know. She didn’t care about me. So why does her death still hurt?”

“But it does,” Titicharoenrak says quietly.

“Yes,” Nattawat admits. “Sometimes I miss her. Especially when little things remind me. Or when I look at the box of her things I still can’t bring myself to open.”

“I miss my parents too,” Norawit whispers, lowering his head. “So much it hurts to breathe.”

“I’m sorry you lost them.”

“I lost them too early. It’s not fair.”

“How old were you?” Nattawat asks gently, moving closer.

“Eleven.”

“Fuck… that is early. What happened? You don’t have to answer if you’re not ready.”

“They were murdered.”

“Oh my God…” Nattawat whispers. “How? Why? Who?”

“When I find out, I’ll tell you,” Titicharoenrak says, rubbing at his burning eyes. “The cops dropped the case. But I won’t stop. I need to know who took my family from me.”

“You want revenge?”

Titicharoenrak nods slowly, stroking his cat as it purrs softly, pawing at his hand and licking him affectionately. He smiles faintly, but even that warmth can’t heal him now.

“Norawit…” Nattawat exhales. “I lost my mom too. But revenge? Is that really you? You’ll ruin your life.”

“You don’t understand,” Titicharoenrak whispers, turning to him. “I saw them die. I heard my mother screaming while they hurt her. I watched my father’s brains splatter across our living room wall. My brother hid in a closet. I stood on the stairs. We watched and couldn’t do anything. I won’t live knowing no one paid for that. If the law won’t punish them, I will. That shot killed us too.”

His voice is hoarse with rage and pain. Nattawat doesn’t dare argue. There’s no hesitation in him, only a violent storm raging behind those brown eyes.

He’s scared. Not of Norawit — but for him.

He finally sees how much pain hides behind that beautiful smile.

Nattawat leans forward and wraps his arms around him. No subtext. Just warmth. Just presence.

Norawit hugs him back instinctively.

He didn’t expect this, but it’s the greatest comfort he’s ever known.

Nattawat gently strokes his hair, trying to soothe the storm inside him. His heart pounds; his fingers tingle with emotion.

Norawit buries his face in his shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent — clean clothes, soap, coffee, something floral. It reminds him of summer. Of his grandmother’s blue-roofed house. Of grass and flowers and petals drifting on the wind.

Nattawat smells like happiness.

“Thank you,” Nattawat whispers. “I know it’s hard to talk about. But it matters. Understanding is the language of any relationship, and I think we speak the same one.”

“Wow,” Norawit murmurs with a faint smile. “Looks like we just took another tiny step toward ‘happily ever after.’”

“Small steps can take you very far.”

“Don’t try to stop me,” Titicharoenrak says quietly. “I’ll keep looking for the truth — with or without you.”

“I won’t stop you,” Nattawat replies. “If I can help, just say the word.”

“I think I’ll need your help.”

“With what?”

“Drifting.”

“…Why?”

“I may have to enter a car race. If I win, Lim leaves my brother and me alone forever.”

“You want me to teach you?” Nattawat asks, stunned.

“I have potential, right? Be honest.”

“You’re great — second only to me,” he smirks. “You’re shaky in corners, though. But I’ve never taught anyone before…”

“No one does it better than you.”

Nattawat exhales.

“What race?”

“Powerslide.”

His eyes widen instantly.

“That one?”

“You know it?”

“It’s a legend. No spectators. No rules. A million-dollar prize. The most dangerous race there is.”

“Then I’ll need you.”

Nattawat looks at him, and nods.

Chapter 6: VI

NIKI — lowkey

dhruv — double take

Lil Wayne feat Static Major — Lollipop

The Pussycat Dolls feat. Busta Rhymes — Don't Cha

Gorillaz — Feel Good Inc.

Monica, Dem Franchize Boyz — Everytime Tha Beat Drop

A week later…

Soft morning sunlight slid across Norawit's skin, gently waking him with its warmth. A sheer chiffon curtain swayed with every breath of wind, and the calm murmur of the ocean drifted in through the open window. It was such a peaceful, beautiful morning.

He'd been having the most wonderful dream.

A day spent visiting his grandmother—her gentle hands, rice cakes she made in the tiny kitchen. A golden retriever he and his brother once tried to train. The scent of freshly cut wood clinging to his grandfather's cotton shirt, a man who'd worked as a carpenter his entire life. And the large cherry tree near the house. He could see its fragile blossoms so clearly, filling the air with a sweet, delicate fragrance. Norawit felt it so vividly that even now, it seemed to fill his senses completely.

He slowly opened his eyes, rubbing them, and immediately understood the reason.

A dark-haired head rested right beside his face.

Nattawat lay on Norawit's arm, his back pressed against Norawit's chest. He breathed quietly and evenly, fast asleep, sprawled across nearly the entire bed. Somewhere in his sleep, Norawit must've hooked a leg over him just to get comfortable. They were tangled together so perfectly, like two parts of the same whole. Every curve fit effortlessly, and even the fact that Nattawat had completely numbed one of his limbs didn't bother Norawit at all right now.

He just smiled stupidly and took a deep breath, burying his nose in Nattawat's pleasantly scented hair. He pulled the bare body closer, wrapping his leg around him more tightly, feeling how warm he was. Norawit was already used to Nattawat kicking off the blanket by morning and sleeping almost sideways across the bed, limbs flung everywhere.

This wasn't the first time they'd woken up together.

Lately, Nattawat had been a frequent guest in his bed ever since that night on the hill. And even though Nattawat claimed he didn't get attached to anyone and that Norawit was far from his ideal, Norawit seriously doubted that. It wasn't true—not really. Maybe he didn't feel anything grand or overwhelming, but he cared. He worried sincerely. He empathized, paid attention, noticed how Norawit was holding up through everything life kept throwing at him.

They were practically inseparable these days, and that alone meant a lot.

Nattawat didn't throw around big words, but when he did open up, when he chose to say something personal, his words always landed exactly where they needed to, touching something deep inside. Every time, Norawit was surprised by just how gentle and sensitive Nattawat truly was beneath everything else.

Over the past week, Nattawat had been coming to the Loop often, watching Norawit regain his driving skills. He wasn't teaching him yet—just observing, assessing how much work lay ahead. Norawit still hadn't given Lim a final answer, still doubting himself, but Lim wasn't pushing him either.

Nattawat stretched lazily, straightening his legs, soaking in Norawit's embrace before shifting restlessly to change position. He turned to face him, still asleep. Norawit smiled again, feeling a sudden rush of tenderness.

Like a small child, Nattawat smacked his lips softly in his sleep, his cheeks slightly puffed. They looked so sweet it made Norawit want to bite them. Infuriatingly handsome. Completely charming.

And then it hit him.

That adorable little thing was lying completely naked in his arms, and Nattawat's morning erection was pressed firmly against his thigh.

Was it even legal to be this beautiful and this hot first thing in the morning?

Nattawat wasn't even fully awake yet, but Norawit's emotions were already spiraling wildly. Carefully, he brushed a few strands of hair away from Nattawat's face, smiling like a lovesick idiot. Nattawat's face was so close Norawit could see the faint blush, the barely-there pillow marks on his cheek, even count his dark lashes.

His gaze lingered on the small mole on Nattawat's cheek, and he pressed a gentle kiss to it. His fingers skimmed lightly over Nattawat's neck, shoulder, arm—trying to wake him softly. Goosebumps bloomed instantly across Nattawat's skin, and he twitched, scrunching his nose.

That damn habit.

Every single time, it made Norawit's heart skip, just like it had during their very first meeting outside the supermarket.

They hadn't known each other long, yet it felt like a lifetime. Had he ever imagined that some random guy who'd tried to rob him would become this important to him? Never. And yet, he didn't regret a thing. Not how fast it all happened. Not how easily he'd trusted him.

Nattawat wasn't perfect. He often denied the obvious, like the fact that what was happening between them was more than just sex. But despite his words, his actions told a completely different story.

Across the room, Jumu sat in an old armchair at the foot of the bed, staring at his owner with clear disdain. The cat lifted his nose proudly and huffed, expressing his disapproval of the situation. He'd grown calmer about Nattawat's visits, but the jealousy was still there. Whenever possible, the little menace made sure to bite or scratch Nattawat, just to remind him who the favorite really was.

"Don't look at me like that," Norawit whispered with a smile. "You're still daddy's favorite."

Jumu blinked slowly, observing them, then lowered his head and kneaded the cushion before curling into a ball. He turned away as if declaring he wanted nothing to do with either of them and promptly fell asleep. It would be hard for him to adjust if they ever ended up living together full-time.

Norawit looked back at the man in his arms and kissed Nattawat's shoulder several times, leaving warm, damp traces behind. Then his hand slid down Nattawat's thigh, straight to his perfect ass. He squeezed.

Nattawat let out a protesting groan, finally waking up properly. He stretched again, then hooked a leg over Norawit and hugged him without opening his eyes.

"Such a good morning," Nattawat mumbled hoarsely.

"Hey, handsome. Sleep well?" Norawit smiled.

"It would've been perfect if you hadn't tried to crush me all night. You're impossible, zero respect for personal space. It's suffocating sleeping with you."

"You took up my entire bed. Even Jumu doesn't allow himself that. I had to get comfortable."

"Sure. Just admit you wanted to grope me," Nattawat replied, cracking one eye open. He stared for a few seconds, then grinned. "Wow."

"What?"

"Why are you so beautiful in the morning? Never noticed before."

"Mmm," Norawit hummed, squeezing his ass again. "What, your sense of smell isn't the only thing broken—your eyesight too? How did you miss my natural beauty all this time?"

Nattawat laughed quietly and pulled him in for a kiss. He loved waking up like this, feeling those bold hands on his body, the way his blood rushed instantly to all the wrong places. If the day started in bed with Norawit, it was guaranteed to be a good one.

Kissing him first thing, threading fingers through soft hair, breathing in that gentle fruity scent, seeing that devastating smile—it all made him dizzy. It sounded embarrassingly sentimental in his head, but lying to himself was pointless.

He was completely, irrevocably gone.

“You kiss beautifully, Natt,” Norawit laughed against his lips, “but that doesn’t make up for the fact that I didn’t sleep all night because of you. I thought you were perfect, but turns out you have a terrible flaw.”

“What are you talking about?” Nattawat frowned.

“You snore. Horribly.”

“Shut up. That’s not true,” Nattawat scoffed, then laughed.

“Oh my God, you’re a monster. What even are those sounds? Like a wounded whale on its last breath.”

“Get lost, idiot. I don’t snore,” Nattawat protested, pushing him onto his back and climbing on top.

“You absolutely do,” Norawit grinned.

“Enough nonsense.”

“How would you know it’s nonsense? You weren’t the one stuck listening. You’re unbearable to sleep with.”

“Then next time you’re sleeping in Jumu’s bed by the door,” Nattawat said, kissing him. “He doesn’t like it anyway. We’ll bond and snore together.”

Norawit laughed softly as Nattawat’s tongue slid into his mouth. Nattawat hovered over him, hands planted beside his head, rocking his hips slowly. Norawit’s half-hard cock brushed against Nattawat’s skin with every movement, igniting their shared desire almost instantly.

Hands roamed over Nattawat’s chest, up to his neck, drawing out a quiet moan and uneven breaths.

Then the phone rang.

Norawit broke away abruptly, leaving Nattawat breathless and clearly displeased. He reached for the phone on the nightstand, but Nattawat grabbed his face and kissed him again.

“Don’t answer,” Nattawat whispered, trailing hot kisses down his neck. “We have something much more important to do.”

“I have to, Natt,” Norawit breathed, tilting his head back.

“You have to satisfy me. You can talk later.”

“What if it’s urgent?”

“Then I’ll help you finish faster so you’re free,” Nattawat said, hands sliding down his chest toward his stomach.

“Fuck,” Norawit groaned, shooting a helpless look at the phone.

It kept ringing—persistent, relentless.

He glanced back at Nattawat and sighed. The sight of this naked, wild thing straddling him was far too tempting to resist. Barely awake and already ready to ride him, just as insatiable as he was. That hungry look again, as if they hadn’t been going at it in this very bed until late last night.

Nattawat moved against him slowly, licking his lips, visibly hard.

God, it was unbearable.

Too tempting.

But what if it was North calling, and he needed help right now?

"Hold on. Just give me one minute, and then I'm all yours," Norawit says, gently nudging him off his hips.

"Hey!" Nattawat protests, falling onto the bed. "Are you insane?"

"Just a minute, I promise," he replies and quickly kisses him.

"You bastard."

Norawit sits on the edge of the bed and grabs his phone as a pillow gets thrown at his head. It's not his brother calling, but a good friend he'd asked for a favor. Perfect, that means he can wrap this up in a minute since he won't have to go rescue his little brother's ass, and then he can return to his delicious breakfast in the form of Nattawat.

Meanwhile, Nattawat lies with his head hanging off the bed, plotting a playful revenge.

"Hey, old man," Norawit says, answering the call.

"Hey, Gem. Sorry, did I wake you? It's still early," Pond asks.

"No, I'm already up."

"Great. I just saw your message from yesterday. Sorry, I was at work and couldn't respond earlier."

"No worries. So what do you think?" Norawit asks, casting a cautious glance at Nattawat.

"Well," Pond hesitates for a moment, silent for several seconds, "I don't even know. I have to ask, why do you need all this?"

Norawit suddenly feels playful fingers on his stomach and looks down in surprise. Nattawat has wrapped his arms around him from behind, then grips his member with his fist and begins stroking it slowly along its full length. He smirks triumphantly at Norawit's expected reaction and presses closer.

"What are you doing?" Norawit whispers, inhaling sharply.

"Just reminding you what you're missing," Nattawat whispers back in his ear, then begins kissing his desirable neck.

"Fifty seconds."

"Oh," comes Pond's surprised voice on the line, followed by quiet laughter. "You're not alone, are you? Am I interrupting?"

"What? Ah..." Norawit stammers, biting his lip to keep from moaning as Nattawat continues his gentle stroking. "No. I'm just..."

"Hurry up, Norawit. I cool off quickly," Nattawat says softly, slowly dragging his tongue across his skin. "Want me to moan in your ear to help you think better?"

"Wait-wait, is that... Dragon’s voice?" his friend asks, and Norawit would bet anything that he's smirking right now. "Holy shit. So it's true, huh?"

"What are you even talking about, buddy?" Norawit plays dumb.

"About you two being a sweet little couple who're about to devour each other."

"How do you already know about this? You never leave your lookout post at 'The Loop'."

"We have a mutual blabbermouth friend," Naravit laughs.

Nattawat continues his torture, speeding up his hand movements and leaving faint hickeys on his neck. Red spots easily form on the delicate skin after prolonged kissing and nibbling, and they look damn sexy. It'll be nice to look at them later and know that these marks were left specifically by him. It probably looks childish from the outside, but he absolutely doesn't want to share him with anyone else. He's never been this jealous, but when it comes to this particular guy, it drives him crazy.

"Norawit, you still there?" Pond asks, openly laughing at him. "Or are you busy up to your balls?"

"Twenty seconds," Nattawat whispers seductively, smiling slyly. "You're late. Your breakfast is getting cold."

"Can you still discuss your question?" his friend asks again.

"Yeah, I'm listening," Norawit replies.

"So why do you need a gun?"

"For safety."

"Don't lie to an old friend."

"Ten seconds, baby," Nattawat whispers impatiently, continuing to stroke his member rapidly.

"Devil," Norawit sighs, closing his eyes.

"If you needed a weapon for safety, you would've bought one long ago. Knowing how your little brother loves trouble, I would've done the same. Are you planning to kill someone?" Pond asks seriously.

"That depends on the circumstances," he says, avoiding specifics.

"So there's a possibility?"

"In the future, yes."

"Five seconds," Nattawat whispers again, grinning as if plotting something.

"Should I try to talk you out of this, or is there no point?" Pond asks with a sigh.

"You can try, but it's pointless. I'll do what I think is necessary. So you might as well help me, you're capable of it."

"I am."

"Then help me out. You owe me, in case you forgot."

"Taking your sweet time, aren't you? Guess I'll have to satisfy myself," Nattawat whispers in his ear, then leaves a short kiss on his cheek and gets out of bed.

He heads to the bathroom, and Norawit watches his magnificent naked body with hungry eyes, licking his lips predatorily. Of course, he'd gladly end this call already, but getting that gun is very important. It might come in handy, considering the mess he and his younger brother are in, and also to uncover information about their parents' deaths.

Nattawat is better off not knowing about this. He's worried enough as it is.

"So will you help me? I need it as soon as possible. I'm willing to wait, but only if I'm sure I can get it through you," Norawit says, making sure the guy has actually left.

"I'll try," his friend sighs.

"And about the second item?"

"The fake bomb? I'm starting to worry, Gem. In a nutshell, what are you planning?"

"To get the truth out of some bastard, if possible. I need to scare him."

"Pretty effective. I'd have shit myself from a stunt like that and sold you out to the highest bidder."

"I know you're not obligated to do this, so just point me to someone who can sell, if you don't want to get involved. I won't put you in a bad spot."

"We've been friends for five years, you don't really think I'd screw you over when you're asking for help, do you?" Pond asks.

"I'd appreciate it. I have some money. I've been saving for other purposes, but I'm prepared to do whatever it takes now."

"You're pretty serious about this, aren't you?"

"Believe me, old man, I've never been more serious," Norawit says confidently.

"Alright," Pond concedes, thinking silently for a moment. "Actually, there is this guy, used to be able to get things through him. He'll be at the street races early this week. I can ask him about all this and get you a big discount, he owes me one. If he agrees, I'll text you the final price. I can't promise he'll sell, but I'll do everything I can. Deal?"

"Thanks, man. You're really helping me out."

"Promise me you'll use this wisely. I'm worried about you."

"I promise. Everything will be fine."

"Alright. Have fun, lovebirds. I'll leave you to it. Say hi to Natt for me," Pond smirks.

"Later," Norawit says with a smile.

He ends the call, shaking his head with a smirk. Phuwin, that damn blabbermouth. It's not like he and Nattawat were hiding it particularly well, but they weren't exactly broadcasting their relationship either. They're perfectly comfortable in their little world. They don't even fully understand what's happening between them themselves. But it seems the entire street racing crew now thinks they're dating. Well, Norawit's not opposed to that arrangement. He likes Nattawat, and he's absolutely sure the feeling is mutual, no matter how much the younger resists.

Norawit places his phone on the table, then heads to the kitchen. As usual, he grabs a water bottle from the fridge and drains half of it. This has become his customary ritual, typically he's parched after a hangover, but today it's for different reasons.

The sound of the shower and the gentle hum of old pipes drift from the bathroom as Norawit stretches and cracks his neck loudly, tilting it side to side. He smiles slyly and, without hesitation, follows those sounds.

The door is slightly ajar, as if inviting him in, and white steam billows from the water. Norawit freezes at the threshold when he sees the hottest sight of his life. Nattawat stands under the shower's spray, breathing heavily with parted lips. His dark eyes, clouded with

desire, gaze at him lustfully from beneath furrowed brows, while his hand moves rhythmically in time with his rapid breathing.

His muffled moans fill the room, drowning in the noise of the water. He strokes his member with his fist, his broad chest heaving under the hot streams.

"Now that's what I call a good morning," Norawit whispers, running his tongue over his lips.

His throat suddenly goes dry despite having just quenched his thirst, and this dirty live porn scene makes him incredibly hot. Norawit watches with such hunger as Nattawat's palm glides over his swollen member that something twitches in his lower abdomen and suddenly tightens with arousal.

He approaches slowly, his eyes roaming over Nattawat's perfect body, while Nattawat continues touching himself, merely smirking defiantly as he lifts his chin. Is this what he planned? To drive him to the brink of hysteria and acute sexual arousal by putting on such a depraved show? He's succeeded brilliantly.

"What are you doing?" Norawit asks with a smile, stepping into the shower with him.

"Like what you see?" he asks brazenly, glancing down at Norawit's erection. "Looks like you really do."

"What's all this about?"

"Taking care of myself. No one else was going to," Nattawat replies, moaning in pleasure as he closes his eyes.

"Damn, Natt. This is the hottest thing I've ever seen."

"Then watch. What else is there to do?" he smirks, breathing raggedly.

"I can help you with that."

"I can help myself, as you can see. And I'm doing quite well."

"But I'd do it better."

"Not interested."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll manage without you. I've cooled off. You took too long."

"I think I get it now," Norawit whispers, taking a step toward him as the wet tip of Nattawat's member brushes against his skin under the water spray. "You're angry."

"I'll feel much better once I come," Nattawat says, continuing to skillfully pleasure himself.

"And if I apologize, will you stop being angry?" Norawit whispers playfully against his lips, running his palms over the younger's waist.

"Depends on how well you apologize."

"I'm magnificent at apologies."

"Alright. Start."

"What do you want, baby?"

"On your knees," he says after a few seconds, smirking as he raises a shaven eyebrow.

Nattawat turns off the water, and Norawit smiles contentedly, kissing him and pulling him closer by the neck. Their tongues collide and begin to battle as if fighting to the death. Nattawat lets out a muffled groan into his mouth and takes a step back. He leans against the wall, running his fingers through Norawit's brown hair and pulling him closer. Norawit's breathing is so loud and heavy that something stirs weakly in his lower abdomen, then tightens into a firm knot. It's satisfying to realize that he gets so turned on around him with barely any effort at all.

Norawit's demanding tongue boldly and greedily caresses Nattawat's, kissing him until his mind clouds over, then the man breaks from his lips and descends with kisses lower. He covers his neck from ear to shoulder with them, as if Nattawat were some delicacy he wants to devour completely. Then he traces the tip of his tongue from his jugular notch to his chin, causing him to shudder and emit a guttural moan, his head thrown back toward the ceiling. And Norawit seals this torture with another kiss to his lips, a triumphant smile on his face.

Nattawat struggles to breathe and closes his eyes against the dizzying pleasure as plush lips glide over his collarbones and chest. Norawit notices the goosebumps on his skin and smirks smugly, pushing his wet hair back. He's practically trembling in Norawit's arms from these torturous caresses, wanting more, and Norawit loves seeing his vulnerability. He traces his tongue over his nipple several times and captures it with his lips.

"Damn it," a long breath escapes Nattawat's chest, his head already spinning from intense arousal. "Why do you always make me lose my mind because of you?"

Norawit smiles contentedly and continues caressing him without answering. Nattawat feels a powerful rush of blood to his member when Norawit gently bites his nipple and pulls slightly, sending sharp sensations through him. Then he does the same to the other, making him writhe with impatience. These kisses are merciless. He's tender one moment, then rather rough the next. So greedy for his body, as if it's never enough, no matter how much he gets. As if he wants to take everything, every cell of his body for himself, leaving absolutely nothing for anyone else.

Norawit's hot breath suddenly gusts against Nattawat's stomach, and lightning-fast goosebumps race down his spine. He gently presses on his shoulders, and the man quickly understands the hint. Norawit obediently sinks to his knees, slowly tracing his tongue over his defined abdomen, and Nattawat shudders once again. He takes his already aching member

in his hand and torturously slowly, in circular motions, traces his tongue around the head, from which lubricant already flows abundantly. He envelops it with his lips and moans in satisfaction, as if being given the sweetest lollipop.

"Damn," Nattawat whispers, running his fingers through Norawit's hair, looking down at him. He sees how his brown eyes sparkle with such wild mischief, as if he's committing some forbidden act. Nattawat moans heavily, running his hand over his face and wiping away the remaining shower water, then squeezes his eyes shut as a powerful charge of electricity courses through his body. It feels too good to maintain control. Dirty curses and moans escape his lips one after another, as his tormentor continues to pleasure him, increasing the intensity. Every time Norawit touches him like this, he wants to voluntarily surrender to sexual slavery for the rest of his days.

There's only one desire—for this to never end, at least not now. They catastrophically don't have enough of each other, no matter how many times they do this. No matter how many times they drive each other to sweet ecstasy or to fireworks in their heads from powerful orgasms, it's always too little.

Norawit takes his member into his mouth, sucking suggestively, then releases it from the captivity of his sensual lips. He rhythmically moves up and down the shaft with his fist several times, piercing him with his wild gaze. He deliberately slowly traces the head along his lips, then licks them. This damn sight makes Nattawat practically want to howl with desire to bury himself deeper in his throat.

Norawit leans forward, lifting his member, and traces his tongue from base to tip while gently fondling his sac in his palm. He misses nothing, completely enveloping every sensitive part of Nattawat's body with his attention, bringing him to that very point where he begins to lose control. A growling sound reminiscent of a wild animal's roar escapes the racer's lips. He greedily gasps for air and squeezes his eyes shut. It's incredible. Simply indescribable pleasure that cannot be expressed in any words. What this man does to his body defies explanation. Can it really feel this good with someone in reality that you start babbling incoherently in whispers?

Every time it reminds him of a sweet dream, because it seems like this doesn't happen in real life. He was always surprised that his temperament and tastes in bed had never matched so perfectly with anyone else. He absolutely loved everything. Every action of Norawit's, the pace, the alternation of caresses, positions, places, cries, moans, and what they both got at the end. The rupture of consciousness that in ordinary life people simply called an orgasm. But between them there was something more, this ordinary word couldn't even begin to describe their sensations. Damn it, this is actually "perfect chemistry." The very kind he hoped to experience his entire life with one and only person. With the one he'd want to love.

Norawit firmly grips his thigh with one hand while rhythmically stroking the shaft with the other. Simultaneously, his tongue and lips create an incredible tandem, lifting the man to the heavens right to the gates of paradise. He envelops his member with his lips again and begins to take him deeper, emitting loud moans of pleasure. So skilled and passionate that Nattawat's vision begins to blur. He stops thinking clearly and unconsciously moves his hips to meet him, penetrating deeper into his throat. The orgasm is already budding as sweet languor

throughout his body, like a blooming flower, and he runs his fingers through his hair again. He grabs them at the crown, clenching into a fist, and roughly pulls back, forcing him to stop. Norawit breaks away from his member, loudly gasping for air and licking his wet lips, sticking his tongue out far. He looks at him questioningly and raises an eyebrow. Nattawat pushes his hair back and moans involuntarily. This damn sight, God. Rosy cheeks, wet brown strands, eyes filled with desire, lips red and swollen from his diligent work. Nattawat sighs heavily, going crazy from this beauty, and bites the tip of his tongue with a slight smirk.

"Good boy," he whispers, stroking his face. "Almost forgiven."

"I'm not finished yet, baby," Norawit whispers back with a smug smirk.

He sharply turns him to face away from him and spanks his ass with a resounding smack. Nattawat shudders in surprise, arching his back and taking a deep breath, as if sensing that something incredible awaits him. Norawit spreads his cheeks and immediately presses his mouth to the desired place. Nattawat moans loudly, bracing his palms against the tile as this damn tongue slides over the sensitive area. God, he so skillfully combines deft movements of his tongue, then replaces them with gentle and smooth penetrations of his fingers. Norawit makes him shudder again and again as he begins to skillfully drive him crazy. A wave of enormous goosebumps courses through his entire body. His heart pounds so hard it feels like it'll leap out of his chest, and breathing becomes simply unbearable from the hot air in the cabin.

Nattawat suddenly freezes and cries out. The reason for this is clear to Norawit, as he's found his vulnerable spot. He gently presses again on the small nodule inside, and the man gasps loudly, then clenches his fists. He hears his quiet curses and smiles triumphantly, then leaves a tender kiss on his ass cheek and repeats the gentle stimulation.

Nattawat's body begins to tremble from how intensely tense and desperate for release it has become, his skin breaking out in goosebumps from the sharp sensations tearing him apart. He's like one giant exposed nerve.

The moment Norawit gently presses against his prostate—he cries out. When he touches him, his hands seem to burn those very spots. And when he tenderly kisses his thigh or buttock, everything clenches into a tight knot in his lower abdomen.

This repeats again and again, until Nattawat finally explodes. Every cell of his body seems to come alive from the skilled caresses. He moans lengthily and comes profusely, almost losing consciousness from it. He's never felt this good in his entire life. Never have his knees trembled so strongly from an orgasm. Never have crystal bells rung in his head from indescribable ecstasy. And never has his vision blurred from how perfect and precise his partner's actions were. Norawit had driven him to some incredible madness.

Nattawat breathes heavily, leaning his forehead against the wall, and smiles in satisfaction. Norawit slowly rises, sliding his lips along his back, and runs his palm over his goosebump-covered spine. He turns the water back on, and the sharp stream of hot droplets makes them both shudder. He lazily moves his fist along his member a few times, then begins to slide the shaft against the man's slightly protruding ass. Nattawat hears his heavy sigh amid the noise of the water and presses back.

Norawit slides his hands over Nattawat's wet and heated body, pulling him closer. Quiet moans escape his lips, and he takes his member again, beginning to rhythmically stroke it with his fist. Nattawat continues to gently rub his ass against Norawit's groin, still feeling how his legs barely support him. The faster Norawit's hand slides along his member, the louder and heavier his breathing becomes. Now he's losing control too. His lips glide slickly across the skin on Norawit's shoulder, and then he bites him. Nattawat hears a low, muffled moan in his ear and feels him release onto his thigh, unable to withstand the prolonged sexual arousal. Hot semen trickles down his skin and mixes with the stream of water, which immediately washes it away.

Norawit takes a few seconds to calm his breathing, then turns Nattawat to face him. He gazes at him with a tender and amazed look, unable to suppress a smile. Nattawat's eyes are closed, his lips parted and trembling slightly from the experienced emotions, then they spread into a satisfied smile. His breathing is so ragged and heavy, as if he'd been running a marathon all this time. Nattawat places his hands on Norawit's shoulders and slowly opens his eyelids, letting his gaze drift over the face before him.

"So, am I forgiven?" Norawit whispers with a smirk.

"You really are a master of apologies, you little sexpot," he laughs quietly and sighs heavily, running his hand through Norawit's hair. "You know, this was different."

"Different?" he raises an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"I don't understand," Norawit says, squinting with a smile.

"Shut up, you know exactly what I mean," Nattawat complains with a frown.

"Not a clue what you're talking about," the man smirks.

"Don't make me say it."

"I'd listen."

"Fine, it's perfect chemistry."

"See? I was right."

"Yes, but it's just you..." Nattawat stammers, tracing his thumb across Norawit's lips. "Forget it, I forgot what I was going to say."

"Oh no," Norawit laughs, shaking his head, "speak. We should be honest with each other, shouldn't we?"

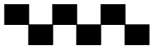
"God, damn you. Fine."

"Well?" he prods, raising an eyebrow.

"I think it's all about you. I've never had anyone better. I'm probably talking nonsense right now, and it's all because I can't think straight, but..."

Norawit silences him with a tender kiss, pulling him close. Nattawat lacks the strength to squeeze his body in return, so he merely weakly wraps his arms around his neck and responds to this sudden impulse. He genuinely believes he's never had better sex than with him, and probably never will. It's completely unknown how their relationship and feelings will develop in the future, but he wanted the man to hear it from him.

"I knew it, you're crazy about me, baby," Norawit whispers with a smile, then kisses him again.



Los Angeles nightlife is wild and restless, just like any major metropolis. The City of Angels almost never sleeps, especially in the central districts and on streets popular with tourists. Nightclubs, private parties, bars, street gatherings, underground races. For adrenaline junkies, their favorite meeting spots aren’t limited to “the Loop”, sometimes they’re just ordinary streets turned into illegal racetracks.

The Arts District is their go-to place whenever a race is planned. Even the cops usually look the other way, pretending not to notice what’s really going on when a crowd of souped-up cars gathers. Sure, there are mandatory raids from time to time, then everyone scatters, spectators and racers alike, but it usually ends with a few fines and nothing more. Street racing has long become part of the city’s youth culture.

The area is also packed with popular, affordable eateries, turning the street into a true culinary hub of Los Angeles. Norawit often hangs out at a burger joint that serves the best fries in all of California, and great coffee to match. The Arts District stays lively deep into the night and is relatively safe compared to Sotel or Vermont Vista. A genuinely interesting place, and one tourists rarely visit. That’s exactly why locals love it.

Pond texted earlier that day, just as he’d promised. Tonight, the guy who could sell weapons was supposed to be at the race. He’d said the dealer would be driving a red Ferrari, so Norawit scanned the cars with interest, searching for the right one.

He sat on the hood of a dark-green Skyline, taking a slow drag and watching the race as it reached its peak. The racers had already completed two laps, one more to go, and a winner would be decided. Tonight, more than anything, he hoped his best friend would take the win.

People crowded the pedestrian zone, shouting the names of their favorites. Some drank openly, music blasted from every direction, and a few even danced right there in the street. Phu, Norawit, and North waited for the results right across from the finish line, which, in reality, was just the stop line at a traffic light. They were all a little tense; none of them could see the entire race, and the outcome was unpredictable.

Titicharoenrak glanced at his younger brother and realized that, for the first time in a long while, he was simply enjoying himself—relaxed, surrounded by his closest friends, without that constant fear for North's life. It felt strange… but good. The source of his greatest worry was sitting right beside him, safe, here and now. For once, Norawit didn't need to wonder where he was or what might be happening to him. And seeing North smile felt like a gift. He smiled so rarely these days that sometimes Norawit forgot what he looked like when he was truly happy.

North had been battling severe depression for a long time, and even now, the fight continued. Every minute of his life was a struggle—against the disorder, childhood trauma, destructive addictions, aggression, and himself. Every day he searched for the strength and the will to keep living.

Things were especially bad lately, for obvious reasons. Norawit knew, his brother had attended nearly five funerals of close friends. No one walks away from that unscathed. It cuts deep, brutally so. Still, North tried to hold on. With his last reserves of strength, but he tried.

Norawit was grateful that he was doing his best to keep his promise. More than anything, he wished North would find a source of strength and happiness in his life, something he desperately needed. Right now, despite everything, Norawit allowed himself to enjoy this fleeting moment and worry about their friend like everyone else.

He was proud of him.

North showed incredible strength, fighting his demons without turning to illegal substances, even though it was unbearably hard. The older Titicharoenrak wrapped an arm around him and smiled stupidly as the crowd erupted into cheers.

"What's with you, Norawit?" North asked, surprised, turning his head.

"Nothing. Just happy you're here. We haven't spent time together like this in ages," Norawit replied with a smile.

The younger brother smiled shyly and patted his chest. At that moment, the roar of engines sounded from a mile away, growing louder and closer. Seconds later, five cars burst around the corner, racing down the city street toward the finish.

A black car with a pink panther painted on its hood surged ahead. Pahn's friends exploded into cheers, jumping to their feet in tense anticipation.

"Just a little more, Pahn!" North shouted, whistling.

"Come on, baby! Kick their asses!" Phuwin yelled, lighting a smoke flare in his hand.

He bounced excitedly, waving it back and forth, and when Pahn crossed the finish line first, dark-blue smoke spilled into the air in her honor, thick, twisting clouds filling the street.

People shouted in delight, congratulating one another, those who'd bet on her had made good money tonight. One by one, the other racers crossed the line, but all attention was on Pahn's victory.

She climbed out of her car, smiling proudly as spectators congratulated her, and a few minutes later she headed toward her friends. She immediately hugged the twins at once, pulling them close by their necks, practically glowing. Her eyes shone with joy, she looked like a child on her birthday.

"Hey, what about me? I worried the most," Tangsakyuen protested.

"That's true, he was a total mess," Norawit laughed as the winner kissed his cheek.

"Were you worried about me, or your money?" she asked, turning to Phu. "Did you bet all your savings on me, idiot?"

"One doesn't cancel out the other," he shrugged, dancing happily to club music blasting from a nearby car. "I'm rich. Filthy rich. And it's all thanks to you," Phuwin sang, pointing at her with both index fingers.

"You're such an asshole," she laughed.

"And I love you," Tangsakyuen continued singing.

"Some friend, you're using me as an investment."

"Oh please, we all do it. And you just got lucky. If Dragon had been here, you wouldn't have won a cent," Phuwin teased.

Pahn scoffed, tying her hair into a high ponytail, then ran over and jumped onto his back, ruffling his chestnut hair. Everyone knew how much he hated that, but she could get away with anything. Phu grumbled, adjusting his red bandana, then grabbed her legs under the knees. She hung there like a monkey, arms wrapped around his neck.

"By the way… where's our Natt?" she asked, throwing a meaningful glance at Norawit. "He usually never misses this kind of thing."

"What? Why are you looking at me?" Titicharoenrak asked, shrugging.

"Maybe because you're the one fucking him?" Phu laughed. "Who else would know where he is?"

"You're a damn gossip girl, Phuwin Tangsakyuen. I'm never telling you another secret. Who else did you tell?"

"Oh relax," he drawled, rolling his eyes. "Everyone already knows. You're not exactly subtle. You'd have to be blind not to see what's going on between you two."

“Do you think he’s already in love?” Pahn asked, swinging her heavy boots in the air.

“If not, he doesn’t stand a chance. He’s in deep,” Tangsakyuen replied.

“He’s already head over heels,” North laughed, wrapping an arm around Norawit’s shoulders and ruffling his hair. “Just look at those heart-shaped sparkly eyes. I don’t remember ever seeing that.”

“Yeah. Same,” Phu added.

“I’m not in love. Back off,” Norawit muttered, scowling as he fixed his hair.

“Oh, look, Natt’s over there,” Pahn said, pointing.

Norawit immediately turned, searching for a familiar Mustang, but was met with loud laughter from his friends. He sighed, shaking his head, realizing he’d been played.

“Not in love, huh?” she teased, arching a brow.

“I hate all of you,” he said, smiling.

Suddenly, his phone vibrated in his pocket. Norawit pulled it out immediately. As expected, it was Pond.

The message was short, and it instantly shattered the light mood, dragging him back into reality.

Left after the turn. His name’s Chan.

Norawit looked up and spotted the hood of an expensive red sports car peeking out from around the corner.

Perfect. He was here.

“Nor, you with us?” his brother asked, noticing he’d drifted off.

“Huh?” Norawit turned.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m going to step away for a minute. It’s loud here, I need to make a call,” he said.

“Alright,” North replied, frowning suspiciously.

His friends kept laughing and chatting as Norawit lifted his phone to his ear, pretending to talk, and walked away. As he approached the corner, he studied the car’s owner.

Attractive, but sharp features. Slanted eyes, a straight nose, thin lips. Long black hair partially tied into a small ponytail, shaved temples exposed. His gaze was dark, carrying a fox-like cunning.

Norawit knew him. He'd seen him at the Loop plenty of times, though they'd never spoken.

The man leaned against his car, snacking on something, and swept an assessing look over Norawit, squinting slightly when he stopped nearby, clearly calculating whether Norawit could afford his services, and why he might need them.

Norawit glanced around, a faint nervous flutter in his chest, and exhaled softly. His friends had lost sight of him, still deep in conversation.

Good.
They didn't need to know about this.

"Titicharoenrak?" the owner of the sports car asks.

"And you're Chan," Norawit replies, nodding slowly.

"Pond told me what you want from me. What, decided to become a terrorist?"

"No. It's for personal use. So, can you help or not?"

"Get in. Let's talk," the guy says, jerking his head toward the car as he keeps chewing.

Norawit slides into the passenger seat of the Ferrari and lets out a deep breath. The pleasant scent of citrus air freshener mixed with polish immediately tickles his nose. Sitting inside a car this luxurious feels almost unreal, pure aesthetic bliss. Smooth lines, spacious, comfortable. He could definitely tear it up on the Loop in something like this. It's a work of art, inside and out.

"You know the price?" Chan asks, shutting the driver's door.

"Yes. I've got the money."

"Since Pond asked on your behalf, I'll give it to you for half. Consider yourself lucky."

"When can you deliver it? Will it take long?"

Chan smirks and reaches for a black case on the back seat.

"Already?" Norawit asks, surprised.

"You familiar with weapons?"

"Not really."

"Can you shoot?"

"Once won a giant teddy bear at a shooting range. Perfect score."

"Well damn, a real pro," Chan laughs, opening the case. "Alright. This is a Beretta 92. You didn't specify a model, so I picked this one. It's not new, but you're not in a position to

complain, it's worth more than what I'm selling it for. Good ergonomics, solid balance, very accurate. Downsides: it's heavy and sensitive to dirt. Otherwise, it's excellent."

Norawit exhales softly, eyebrows lifting as he swallows nervously.

It's hard to believe. A real combat handgun lies right in front of him. He's about to hand over money he's saved for years—for college. He'd refused to touch those savings to cover his brother's debts, hoping one day he'd finally chase his dream. Or at least keep them for a truly desperate situation.

Looks like that moment has arrived.

Even his savings weren't enough. He'd had to sell some of his mother's jewelry. And still, Pond's help had been enormous. He hated losing those things, hated losing that money. But right now, a weapon mattered more.

For both of them. For him. For North.

When people like Damian start controlling your life, you need something—anything—that gives you even a fraction of peace. And this wasn't just for one purpose. He just needed to train a little, remember how to shoot.

"Ammo's included," Chan says. "If you need more, call me."

"And this?" Titicharoenrak nods toward a small box, no bigger than a pack of cigarettes.

"A fake explosive device, just like you asked. The timer works, so it'll scare the shit out of anyone. Perfect if you need to intimidate someone," Chan says, snapping the case shut.

"Thanks. Didn't think you'd get everything so fast."

"No problem. You'll get the goods today. I'll text you where to find them and where to leave the money. You know we need to keep this clean. I don't want trouble. You don't want trouble. I've got your number. Deal?"

"Deal," Norawit says, shaking his hand.

"Great. Now get lost. We don't know each other. And good luck, Titicharoenrak. People don't buy things like this for no reason. Be careful, don't shoot yourself," Chan adds with a wink.

"I'll try," Norawit says, stepping out of the car.

Fuck. Turns out getting a weapon is frighteningly easy, if you know the right people and have the money. Sure, if the cops ever find it, he's screwed. No permit, no excuses. Maybe he'll never even fire it.

But now he feels safer.

There's only one person in this world he could kill without regret, the one who ordered his parents' deaths. Not the men who broke into their home. The one who gave the command. He still has to find him.

Norawit watches people standing in small groups along the street, cheering after the race. He wishes he had a life like theirs. Carefree. Easy. No constant weight pressing on his chest. He'd give anything just to attend college, go out at night, laugh like this.

But his life had never been that simple.

He exhales deeply and heads back to his group, pushing the thoughts away.

Near Phu's Nissan stand two familiar cars—a sleek black Mustang and a Martin. The Jirochtikul twins must've finally arrived. Nattawat had said he'd be late because of family stuff. Some formal dinner or something.

Norawit walks slowly along the curb, his eyes drawn to the profile that makes his heart stutter. A smile appears on its own as he watches Nattawat laugh at something North says. He's talking to his brother, listening intently. The bucket hat hides his big brown eyes, but his nose wrinkles adorably when he smiles wide. Blue jeans, leather jacket—everything about him fits his reckless bad-boy image perfectly.

Nattawat nods, then suddenly turns his head.

His gaze scans the crowd—and stops on Norawit.

He almost holds his breath for a second, then exhales in clear relief.

He'd been waiting for him.

The realization sends something bright and electric through Norawit's chest. Nattawat rarely talks about his feelings, but he doesn't have to. His face gives him away every time. Even now—soft smile, eyes locked on Norawit, as if no one else exists on the street.

Norawit joins them, stopping close, studying his face beneath the hat. Being near him feels good. Too good. He wants to pull him into a tight hug, kiss those beautiful lips, even the tiny mole on his nose. And in Nattawat's eyes, he sees the same desire.

They don't speak. They don't need to.

Norawit slips an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close, and glances at their friends, who are openly staring, grinning like idiots. It's as if neon signs are glowing above their heads:

You're hopelessly in love, and we're not saving you.

They're all genuinely happy for them. None of them have ever seen Norawit or Nattawat in serious relationships before, so watching this slow shift, from strangers to lovers, is fascinating.

“What?” Titicharoenrak rolls his eyes. “Get lost.”

“Nothing,” Phuwin shrugs, barely holding back laughter.

“Yeah. Totally nothing. You don’t look like a couple at all,” Night chuckles.

“We’re not a couple. Shut up,” Nattawat snaps, shooting him a lethal glare.

“Oh? Really?” Night smirks. “Then maybe I’ll take him on a date. He’s my type.”

“Hey, rich asshole. Long time no see,” Norawit says with a smile, noticing Nattawat’s jealous huff and the way his hand tightens at Norawit’s waist.

“Yeah, unfortunately your brother doesn’t come to my club anymore. Harder to lure you all in now.”

“If you want to see me, just say so,” North cuts in, stretching his neck, arms crossed, charming smile in place. “I don’t mind. Take me on a date instead.”

“That easy?” Night laughs.

“I’m not Nattawat. You’re hot, I’m hot. I’m not pretending otherwise.”

“Oh my God, they’re all flirting,” Satang sighs, laughing as he joins them.

“Do you know how hard it is to exist between them,” Phuwin points at Norawit and Nattawat, “when they look at each other like dessert twenty-four seven? I already hate them. My love life is nonexistent.”

“Jealous?” the racer smirks.

“Of how deep you’re into each other?” Tangsakyuen considers. “Maybe… a little.”

“Go after Pahn, then,” North suggests. “She’s hot and single.”

“Oh my God, you want me to commit murder at such a young age? I’d kill him on day one,” Pahn shoots back.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you out,” Night laughs.

“Your services are too expensive,” Pahn snorts. “Baby girl had to shake his ass at the bar for ten bucks.”

“Well, if you did it, no one would complain. I’ll pay you ten if you repeat it,” Phu grins.

Everyone bursts out laughing. Pahn smacks him hard on the back of the head. He groans dramatically.

Watching them like this—carefree, happy—feels rare. Precious. Pahn bickers with Phuwin like an old married couple. Satang chats with North and Night; there’s a strange tension

between the latter two—not unpleasant, just awkward. Maybe attraction. Maybe something else.

Norawit leans back against the Mustang's hood, smiling. Nattawat steps between his legs, hands resting on his shoulders. He studies Norawit's face softly, then leans in and kisses him.

The moment their lips meet, something twists warmly in Norawit's chest, goosebumps racing over his skin.

God, he missed him, despite seeing him just that morning.

"Hey, baby," Nattawat whispers.

"Hey, sweetheart," Norawit smiles. "Is that my new nickname?"

"Don't get excited. You're still my sexy menace," Nattawat laughs.

"Yours, huh?" Norawit smirks smugly.

"You're one sentence away from meeting my knee," Nattawat warns.

"I was just thinking out loud. How was home? How'd it go?"

"I need psychiatric help after that shit," Nattawat sighs.

"That bad?" Norawit frowns, stroking his cheek.

"My dad is… unbearable. Five minutes is torture. I feel like crap."

"Want me to distract you?" Norawit murmurs, pulling him closer by the belt.

"Not here. Not now. Later I'm not letting you go, handsome. I'll be riding you like a lunatic."

"That's just a regular Tuesday. Or Wednesday. Or any day," Norawit smirks, tracing his fingers along Nattawat's slim waist.

"I'm glad you're here," Nattawat says quietly, brushing his hair back. "I thought about you the whole time. Being with you calms me down. I really needed that."

"Just say you missed me," Norawit grins.

"Right now you're annoying."

"Is it that hard to admit?"

"I'm not good at it."

"I think you're doing great. And I missed you too," Norawit whispers.

Nattawat laughs softly, cheeks tinting pink, and pulls him in by the neck. He kisses Norawit first this time, and their friends groan in unison like it's a bad sitcom.

It’s ridiculous. And perfect.

Nattawat ignores everything else, kissing him deeper, hungrier. Whistles and claps follow. Nattawat flips them off without breaking the kiss. Norawit laughs into his mouth and mirrors the gesture behind his back.

The laughter gets louder.

“God, you’re a perfect match,” Phuwin says, snapping photos.

“Let’s get out of here,” Norawit says, finally pulling away.

“Where to?”

“You said you needed to relax.”

“I did, but what are you planning?” Nattawat asks.

“Trust me,” Norawit smiles, intertwining their fingers. “Like I trusted you once.”

Cigarettes after sex — Falling in Love

Cigarettes after sex — Each Time You Fall in Love

Gemini Norawit — What if

With the Mustang’s keys in his possession, Norawit drove through the streets of Los Angeles, weaving smoothly between cars and heading toward the edge of the city. The roads were clear, no traffic to slow them down, so it wasn’t difficult at all. Soon they merged onto the I-10 freeway leading to Santa Monica.

They weren’t in a hurry. It was already late evening, and Norawit had decided to show him one of his favorite spots outside the city. It was only a little over twenty minutes away—and at this hour, the place should be especially beautiful. Exactly what Nattawat needed after such a heavy day.

Nattawat didn’t object to Titicharoenrak being behind the wheel of his precious car, even though he usually trusted it to no one. Today, he was emotionally and physically drained after dealing with his father, so he simply sat in silence, watching his driver. He studied the way

Norawit handled the car, how he felt the road, storing every detail for later—because it seemed he had no real choice. He would have to train him.

He'd been watching Norawit all week, ever since the guy had been burning through Phu's tires.

They didn't know much about Powerslide, but you didn't need to be a genius to understand that being a good racer wouldn't be enough to win it. You had to be fearless. Ruthless. You needed a clear goal and the will to chase it no matter what. And if things got dirty, you had to be ready—ready to cut someone off at insane speed without hesitation. This wasn't just another run on the Loop. This was a completely different level.

Nattawat didn't refuse to train Norawit because he lacked skill—he refused because he was worried about him. He tried to hide it, but the truth was, he was terrified. This race could easily become Norawit's first and last. Too much was unknown. Too many variables. No one knew where the organizers would throw the participants this year, who the competitors would be, or how it would end.

Truthfully, Norawit had real potential. He was a diamond—he just needed to be cut properly, and fast. And still, deep down, Nattawat hoped he wouldn't pass the selection. That way, everyone would be safer.

Norawit handled the Mustang well. He felt speed instinctively and changed lanes with ease. But something was missing. He was too careful, as if constantly afraid, despite his love for reckless driving. On a bike, he was fearless. Inside a car, though, he was restrained, holding himself back.

Most likely, it was vulnerability. He didn't feel fully confident behind the wheel of a car. Corners were his weak point, and it crushed his self-assurance. He chose the wrong tactics and missed sharp turns again and again. Where Nattawat sometimes had to rein himself in, Norawit needed the opposite—to relax, to dare more.

That was the experience they needed to share.

If they could drive together, they'd be unstoppable. Norawit was the one who could ground Nattawat, make him slow down. And Nattawat was the one who could teach Norawit to think clearly, not let emotions take the wheel. They balanced each other, pushed each other forward, complemented one another perfectly.

Maybe that was their own kind of quiet idyl.

Nattawat watches Norawit shift gears, sees how tightly he grips the steering wheel, tension radiating from his body. His posture is stiff, his eyes constantly flicking to the mirrors. Control is good—but right now he looks like a kid who stole his dad's car and is terrified of getting caught.

A faint smile tugs at Nattawat's lips. He leans closer and places a hand over Norawit's on the wheel.

“Relax,” he says gently. “You’re overthinking it.”

“Kind of hard not to—I’m driving,” Norawit replies.

“You’re tense. Your hands are practically stone,” Nattawat says, softly rubbing his forearm, moving up to his shoulder. “You’re sitting like a straight-A student in the front row. Don’t hold your breath when you overtake. Just relax. You drive well.”

“Probably a habit from riding a bike,” Norawit sighs. “You have to control every tiny movement, your balance, your body. For me, it’s as natural as breathing.”

“I get why you’re unsure,” Nattawat says quietly. “It’s your first serious race. And one like this.”

“Yeah,” Norawit exhales. “And it’s in a car. And my brother’s freedom depends on it.”

“But right now, you can relax. That matters too. Enjoy it—otherwise what’s the point? Don’t forget you’re driving, but try to imagine it’s just a calm ride. When I race on the Loop, I don’t fear being overtaken or missing a turn. I stay light, focused, in control. I can mess up—and that’s normal. If you make mistakes now, we’ll know what to fix. Your failures will make you better,” Nattawat says, resting a hand on his thigh.

“It’s hard to relax when I know what I’ve gotten myself into.”

“You’re a damn good biker. You can handle this. When you ride—what do you feel?”

“Satisfaction. Freedom—though I’m really its prisoner. A beautiful monster under my control, one that could kill me at any moment, and it’d be my fault. It gives me control over my life. Every ride could be the last. I know how fatal mistakes can be—but I risk it anyway.”

“You think a lot while riding,” Nattawat says. “Analyze, control.”

“Yeah.”

“And you love it.”

“I do.”

“Then driving a car should be easier for you. I’m no bike expert, but I get it. Bikes need control—and I lack that behind the wheel. I’m a trick driver. That’s my talent. Maybe that’s why motorcycles never worked for me. I’m too impulsive. But you’re a racer—no matter the vehicle. I’ve seen it. You just haven’t done it seriously in a long time.”

“Yeah. Before racing you, I hadn’t driven a car in years.”

“Try to feel the same way you do on a bike. Think, but relax. Your tension ruins your driving. You were good while I watched you this week, but corners mess you up every time. Seriously, were you planning to beat me like this?” Nattawat laughs.

“Hey, I was good,” Norawit protests. “I almost won. If it weren’t for North, you’d still be crawling in last place.”

“You were good at dirty but beautiful tricks. You outplayed me because you knew I wouldn’t boost. If I’d played dirty too, you wouldn’t have gotten close.”

“You know what’s funny?” Norawit smirks.

“What?”

“I suck at car racing, but I’m the only one who’s shown you my taillights.” He flicks Nattawat’s nose.

“That’s why I say you have potential, baby,” Nattawat laughs, kissing his cheek. “Relax. You’ll have to learn that if you want to race at Powerslide level. You know there’ll be people way better than me, right? Nobody pays to watch losers race.”

“Aren’t you the best?” Norawit asks with a grin.

“If I were, I’d have passed the selection. But I’ll take the compliment.”

“So… I’m not hopeless?”

“You’ll make it. Not on the first try. Or the second. Drift takes patience and experience. You walk before you run. For now, learn to relax. Breathe. Count to five if it gets hard. I should be nervous, you’re driving my car and could wreck us both, but I’m calm. I’m safe with you.”

He takes a deep breath and gestures for Norawit to follow. Norawit inhales, exhales slowly, counting. Again. And again.

To his surprise, the tension eases. His grip loosens.

Nattawat notices and pats his thigh approvingly.

“Good. You learn fast.”

“So… you’ll help me?”

“I think so.”

“Why?”

“You need to learn drift to win and fix your life. I’m the best at it in this city. Why wouldn’t I help?”

“But why you?” Norawit asks. “Why do you want to help?”

“Because I like you, Norawit Titicharoenrak,” Nattawat says, meeting his eyes. “Satisfied?”

“Wow,” Norawit blinks. “That’s—”

“But that doesn’t mean we’re a couple or any of that vanilla crap.”

“Vanilla crap?” Norawit laughs.

“Yeah. You’re someone I like as a—” Nattawat pauses. “Person.”

“A person you sleep with.”

“Yes. A person I sleep with.”

“That’s literally a couple,” Norawit laughs.

“Shut up. No.”

“Okay,” Norawit shrugs, smiling.

“That’s it? No ‘you’re my boyfriend’ speech?”

“Nope. If you don’t want it, fine.”

“…Interesting.”

“Will Night still be awake when we get back?”

“Why my brother?”

“He asked me out. I should call him after I drop you off.”

The murderous look Nattawat gives him makes Norawit laugh.

“Got you,” he chuckles.

“Go on a date with him and I’ll kill you both,” Nattawat growls. “I’ll run you over with the Mustang and ask my dad to cover it up.”

“I love when you’re jealous,” Norawit purrs, possessively rubbing his thigh.

“That’s not jealousy. It’s ownership.”

“Ownership?” Norawit raises a brow.

“Fuck you,” Nattawat mutters, but smiles anyway.

“Relax. I’m joking. So, when do we start training?” Norawit asks as they pass the city sign.

“This weekend. We’ll train where I did.”

“Where?”

“Out of town. We’re all going together. If you learn there, the Loop will feel like a kiddie ride.”

“Where exactly?”

“Oh right, you left before Pond explained. He invited us to his hometown in Ojai—birthday trip. Mountains, campfires, tents. Nature. Close circle.”

“And there’s a place to train?”

“Trust me.”

“…That’s half an hour away.”

“Yeah. Problem?”

Damian could call anytime, but half an hour wasn’t far.

“No. It’s fine,” Norawit says. “Who taught you?”

“Myself. And Pond. And a friend. He was a drift racer.”

“Was?”

“He died. Powerslide was his dream. He crashed on the second stage.”

“Oh… That’s how you know.”

“Yeah. Since then, I don’t get attached.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know.”

“There’s so much I don’t know about you.”

“Same.”

“We can talk while we walk.”

“Walk?” Nattawat arches a brow.

“I didn’t bring you to Santa Monica just to drive,” Norawit smiles, parking by the pier.

“Wait, where are we?” Nattawat asks, then grins at the view. “Shit. I didn’t even notice.”

Several dozen meters of sandy shore separate them from the boundless Pacific Ocean. From here, a breathtaking view opens onto the famous Santa Monica Bay beach, one you can’t quite see from anywhere else in the city. It’s the jewel of all California.

Large waves roll in loudly, crashing against the sand, while a beautiful boulevard stretches along the coastline. Fresh flowers grow everywhere, filling the air with an almost unreal fragrance. They’re everywhere, along the ground, in flowerbeds, climbing trees, while palm trees line the promenade in uneven rows. Soft yellow streetlights complete the scene, casting

a warm glow over the evening waterfront. Clubs, theaters, and bars stay open late here, so even now, quiet music drifts in from all sides. Dozens of people stroll along the water or sit on the sand, while others glide past on rollerblades or skateboards.

It's stunning. Simply unreal.

The perfect place for a late-night walk after a hard day.

Nattawat takes a deep breath and smiles, lifting his face to the starry sky. Norawit nailed it, one hundred percent. The ocean breeze makes the air here feel fresher, cleaner than the rest of Los Angeles. Breathing feels different here. Easier. And that's exactly what he needs right now.

"Do you like it?" Titicharoenrak asks, stepping closer.

"Why did you bring me here?" Nattawat asks, turning his head slowly, taking it all in.

"You said you wanted to unwind. To relax."

"And a walk will help?" he squints skeptically.

"Depends on the walk. And who you're with," Titicharoenrak replies with a wink. "Come on. Take a walk with your not-boyfriend on a not-date, no cheesy vanilla crap."

He doesn't take his hand. Doesn't pull him into an embrace like couples on actual dates do. Instead, he walks ahead along the promenade, stepping backward, smiling at him with effortless charm. He doesn't force his attention, doesn't crowd him, and the gesture is unexpectedly sweet. Norawit gives him space, letting Nattawat decide for himself whether to step closer, whether this evening will become something more.

Smart. Gentle.

Nattawat smirks, biting his lip, and follows.

They stroll slowly along Third Street Promenade near the pier, chatting about nothing in particular, getting to know each other just a little better. Along the way, they pass animal sculptures—bodies sculpted from trimmed green hedges, heads made of metal. Some of the heads even spray water like fountains. It looks ridiculous in the best way.

Titicharoenrak gives each one a stupid nickname, making Nattawat laugh. Nattawat studies everything with genuine interest, he's never seen anything like this in real life before. Some kind of modern art neither of them really understands. But they're having fun. They feel comfortable together.

Nattawat notices how his heart stutters every time Titicharoenrak laughs, how something inside him flips over without warning. His kind eyes narrow into little crescents, and he covers his mouth with his hand as if embarrassed by his own dazzling smile. He has this habit of grabbing onto whoever is nearest when he laughs so hard he might fall.

And that sound, his laughter, is probably the most beautiful thing Nattawat's heard in a long time. Except, maybe, for his breathless moans.

But his laughter stirs something else entirely. Something fragile. New.

Norawit walks a few steps ahead, weaving playfully between lampposts as he tells funny stories from his childhood and teenage years. He laughs freely, acts as though they've known each other forever. And walking beside him now, under the glow of streetlights, with the ocean so close and romance hanging thick in the air, Nattawat realizes something uncomfortable:

This boy means far more to him than he's willing to admit.

He shouldn't have grown attached. But he has. Completely.

That's a problem.

No matter how hard Nattawat denies it, Norawit matters to him. He's insanely jealous of him, can't even imagine someone else having him. Norawit makes his heart freeze and race all at once, something no one else has ever managed to do. The thought of Norawit disappearing from his life, like everyone else he's loved, terrifies him.

That might be his greatest fear: to grow so attached he breathes someone in… only to lose them.

So he does everything he can to push away the thought that he's falling in love.

Nattawat pauses to let an elderly couple pass. He watches as Titicharoenrak spins around a lamppost, holding onto it like a carefree child. He looks impossibly beautiful. Happy. And suddenly Nattawat knows, more than anything, that he wants Norawit to always be like this. Happy. Beside him.

For once, he lets go of the chaos in his head.

He steps toward him just as Norawit spins back around the lamppost.

"So," Norawit says, opening his eyes, "my favorite question. What do you dream about? I think I ask everyone this—"

He doesn't get to finish.

Nattawat kisses him.

Norawit blinks in surprise, but then kisses him back, no questions asked. None are needed.

This is their first date.

"Mmm," Nattawat hums thoughtfully against his lips, smiling. Then, as if nothing happened, he answers, "Music. I write songs. Play guitar."

“Oh no,” Norawit groans dramatically, throwing his head back. “God, why? Did he have to be this perfect? Couldn’t I have gotten someone else? This is unfair. He’s way too good for me!”

“Stop,” Nattawat laughs, noticing people staring.

“Wait, so you’re telling me my boyfriend plays guitar and writes songs, and I still haven’t gotten a serenade under my window?” Norawit protests, shoving his shoulder. “Terrible boyfriend. Zero romance.”

“First of all, I’m not your boyfriend. Second, I haven’t written that many songs. But… maybe someday I’ll play something for you,” Nattawat says, smiling.

“Oh my God. I knew you sang. Seeing you with a guitar is officially one of my dreams now. I’m hopeless at music, but I danced when I was a kid.”.

“I knew dancing wasn’t foreign to you. I saw you on that bar counter. You’ve got insane flexibility. Ever think about doing it professionally? ‘Dancer Norawit Titicharoenrak’ sounds good.”

“Did you watch Step Up too many times?” Norawit scoffs.

“Alright, alright. Then what would you want to do, if you had the chance to get a proper education?” Nattawat asks, genuinely curious.

“Medicine,” Norawit says with a smile.

“Really? Medicine?”

“Yeah. I wanted to be a doctor. Mom sometimes took my brother and me to work when she had night shifts. She was an ICU assistant. I loved watching the doctors work. It always seemed like one of the hardest, but most fascinating, professions. I guess I’ve wanted to save people since I was a kid.”

“Wow,” Nattawat whispers, smiling. “You’d make an amazing doctor. You’ve got such a kind heart. Helping people is basically your hobby. It’s great when a hobby becomes a profession.”

“Yeah. For now, I’m just a mechanic, but I like that too. Machines are another hobby.”

Nattawat understands him perfectly. His own dreams are limited by circumstances. He wants to travel, buy a house, study music professionally, but higher education in LA is brutally expensive. He’s tried for scholarships more than once. Paid tuition is completely out of reach. The account his father once filled had been emptied long ago, probably by his mother. And he’d never ask his father for money. Not even if he were starving.

The only valuable thing he owns is the Mustang. And even that is priceless, not for money, but for memory. He won it in his first Loop race. Selling it would feel like betrayal.

Norawit notices Nattawat’s distant stare, the way he’s been slowly sipping soda through a straw, staring at the ground, sighing now and then. He had a rough day. Norawit tried to

distract him, but maybe not enough.

“Do you want to go home?” he asks, eating his ice cream cone. “You seem lost in thought. Maybe dragging you here was a dumb idea.”

“No,” Nattawat says quickly. “No, sorry. I like it here. Let’s walk more.”

“What happened?” Norawit asks seriously. “What knocked you off balance?”

“My dad,” Nattawat admits. “I don’t live with him anymore, but sometimes I have to visit. Those pointless dinners always end the same way. He talks about how Night and I disappointed him. How we’re unworthy of his last name.”

He exhales sharply.

“I get why he says it about me. I didn’t go to some elite university. I don’t have a prestigious job. I have nothing except my car. But he says the same about my brother, who owns a famous club, drives a Martin he earned himself, lives in Beverly Hills. How does he not measure up?”

“Were you hurt for Night?”

“Yes. It was cruel. I saw the pain in his eyes. He rarely looks vulnerable, but today I saw myself in him. I used to look at my mother the same way. Our father is awful, but Night still wants his love. And I get it. Kids don’t need a reason to love their parents. Even when they’re beaten. Even when they’re neglected. It’s unconditional.”

“He loves him despite everything,” Norawit murmurs.

“It’s stupid. Dad will never change. A career-obsessed man who built everything on corruption. And Night keeps trying to prove himself to someone who doesn’t want him.”

“I’m sorry you got parents like that,” Norawit says softly. “You deserve better.”

“What about yours?” Nattawat asks, reaching for his ice cream. “You never talk about them.”

“Hey, don’t you dare,” Norawit laughs, swatting him away. “I don’t share food.”

“Seriously? You’re stingy with ice cream?”

“It’s vanilla with chocolate chips. Don’t even think about it. I offered you some, you chose soda.”

“I changed my mind,” Nattawat grins, hugging him. “Let me try.”

“No!”

“I’ll just take one bite.”

“Nope.”

“You’re terrible,” Nattawat snorts, giving up. “Fine. Then answer me. What about your parents?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you’re willing to tell.”

“Well,” Norawit shrugs, “we had a simple, good family. Mom worked in a hospital. Dad was a regular office lawyer. We weren’t rich, but we weren’t poor. They loved us. Loved each other.”

“Were you happy?”

“Very. No yelling. No violence. Mom was our best friend. Dad was our role model.”

“Who do you take after? Where’d you get those pretty lips?” Nattawat asks, smiling.

“Looks from Dad. Character from Mom—strong, determined, caring… and a little bold.”

“And gentle,” Nattawat adds softly. “You’re much softer than North.”

“Yeah. He takes after Dad. Always more closed-off. After everything that happened, it got worse. It was hard to get him to talk, but better than after the tragedy.”

“You mean… he didn’t talk?”

“Literally. PTSD, or something like it. I had to teach him how to speak again.”

“Fuck,” Nattawat exhales.

“And then there was the orphanage. Our grandparents had already died. No other relatives. That place was hell. Kids are cruel. They bullied him because he couldn’t talk. An eleven-year-old boy became their punching bag.”

“That’s why you protect him like that.”

“Yes,” Norawit nods. “I had to. I turned my grief into love. I worked from sixteen. Bought him a skateboard. Tried to bring color into his life. Maybe I overdid it… I just loved him so much.”

“You’re an incredible brother,” Nattawat says quietly.

“Or I messed up badly. Look where we are now.”

Nattawat stops, turning him toward himself.

“You’re extraordinary,” he says softly. “Your parents would be so proud of you.”

He kisses him gently, as if sealing his words with the touch. Nattawat moves over his lips slowly, tenderly, then cups his cheek in his palm. In this moment, when Norawit opens his fragile heart and trusts him with something so heavy, he wants to give him at least a little

warmth, in whatever way he knows how. This is his way of saying thank you. Thank you for letting him come so close to his deepest secrets.

That isn't easy.

And his parents truly should have been proud to have a son like him. Norawit Titicharoenrak is an extraordinary person, there's no denying it.

Nattawat pulls back carefully and strokes his cheekbone with his thumb, looking into his eyes. They're full of gratitude and quiet happiness. It's obvious his words touched him deeply.

"Thank you," Norawit whispers, a small smile curving at the corner of his lips. "For saying that. And for understanding."

"Someone had to," Nattawat replies softly. "It's the truth." He leans in and kisses him again, brief but sincere.

"I know what you want to ask," Norawit says as they continue walking. "What happened to them."

"You mentioned it that night at your place," Nattawat answers. "But I still don't know the whole story."

"Yeah," Norawit exhales, pushing his hair back with a crooked smile. "Not exactly the best topic for a relaxing walk, but if you really want to know."

"I do. But only if you're ready to talk about it. I don't want to cross a line or touch something you'd rather keep to yourself."

"It wasn't just a murder," Norawit begins, his voice heavier now. "What happened that night felt more like an execution. Like some kind of revenge against my father."

"Why do you think that?" Nattawat asks quietly.

"They beat my mother in front of him," Norawit says, swallowing hard. "God knows what else they did to her. I didn't see it, but I heard it. They beat her to death. Brutally. Coldly. There wasn't a single unbroken place left on her body. If they'd only wanted to eliminate her, they could've just shot her in the head, like they did with my father. But they didn't." He shakes his head.

Nattawat notices how difficult it is for him to say this and reaches for his hand, threading their fingers together, rubbing his forearm in silent support.

"It felt like they wanted to violate my father psychologically," Norawit continues. "They forced him to watch. I think they wanted him to suffer. They wanted to hurt him as much as possible before killing him."

"Revenge… for what?" Nattawat whispers.

“I don’t know. They tortured him, asking if he’d told anyone certain information. My dad swore he hadn’t. And then they said, ‘You know why you’re about to die,’ and shot him in the forehead.”

“Fuck…” Nattawat exhales, squeezing his hand tighter. “I can’t even imagine how you watched all of that. You were just a kid.”

“I was lucky, I didn’t see everything,” Norawit says quietly. “North did. He saw all of it, from beginning to end. I think that’s why he never tells me the details. When those people broke into the house, he went downstairs after hearing the noise. Mom hid him in the closet. I woke up later, from her screams and my father’s yelling, but I was too scared to go down. When I finally did… she was already gone.”

“Where does so much cruelty even come from?” Nattawat murmurs. “Some people are worse than animals.”

“You’re right,” Norawit nods, shuddering slightly. “Those screams… I still hear them in my nightmares. And what I saw when I went downstairs, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Not even on fucking Damian Lim. And I already hate him.”

“So your brother was hurt even more than you,” Nattawat says after a pause. “I didn’t understand his behavior for a long time. Now I do.”

“I honestly can’t imagine what his heart felt while he watched them torture our mom,” Norawit whispers. “She begged them to stop. They broke everything they could, and all she cared about was us. One of them saw me, almost killed me too. But I guess their target was only our parents.”

“My blood is freezing just listening to this,” Nattawat says, kissing his shoulder, eyes squeezed shut. “Did you see the one who killed them?”

“I looked him in the eyes for a full sixty seconds,” Norawit whispers.

“How… God, even imagining that is impossible.”

“I was sitting on the stairs, watching from above, afraid to even breathe. When it was over and they were about to leave, the man who shot my dad noticed me. They dragged me to him. He was going to kill me, but didn’t. After they left, I ran upstairs to find my brother. I hoped he’d hidden in his room, under the bed… but I heard him screaming downstairs.”

“And you found him there?” Nattawat asks softly.

“Yes. He was sitting next to mom, stroking her hand. That scream was the last sound I ever heard from him. After that, he didn’t speak for an entire year.”

“And no one was ever punished for their deaths,” Nattawat says in disbelief.

Norawit just nods.

He exhales deeply, almost with relief. It's strange, but it feels like a weight has finally lifted off his chest. Sharing this with Nattawat feels… right. Necessary. He rarely tells this story, but he wanted him to know. Everything. Without lies or softening the truth.

They stop at the entrance to Pacific Park on the pier and stand there in silence, watching the ocean. The waves roll in gently, mixing with the chime of a vintage carousel nearby, forty-four wooden horses spinning beneath an iron arch.

Nattawat rests his chin on Norawit's shoulder and wraps his arms around him from behind. The horror he's just heard barely fits in his mind. What kind of information is worth the lives of two innocent people? And no one has paid for it.

It's monstrous.

Norawit and North were lucky to survive, though it's hard to call what they lived through luck.

Norawit blinks quickly, chasing away the memories. Not the time for that. This is supposed to be a spontaneous date. He turns to Nattawat and gives him a faint smile. Nattawat understands without words, the topic is closed for today, and kisses his cheek in quiet gratitude.

Norawit leads him into the park, past stalls and rides, holding his hand tightly. Nattawat follows, eyes lingering on the back of his brown hair. They walk through skaters and dancers, music pulsing through the air. It feels like a fair, maybe even a carnival, something reminiscent of Mardi Gras. Food trucks everywhere, ribbons and lights overhead, the air thick with the scent of caramel. Street performers weave through the crowd, pulling people into joyful dances. Latin music plays somewhere nearby, wrapping everything in warmth.

Nattawat pauses at a stall filled with trinkets, brushing his fingers over little boxes and figurines. Some shake from the dancing crowd, tiny bells chiming softly. It's wonderful here. friendly people, smiling faces. The vendor is practically ready to give him a Ferris wheel souvenir just for being cute.

He walks beneath rows of colorful lanterns and looks back.

Norawit is watching him.

People swirl around them, singing together, forming a living current. But Nattawat sees only one person. Everyone else blurs into nothing. The wind lifts Norawit's brown hair, his lips curve into a gentle smile, and suddenly something inside Nattawat flips.

Everything freezes.

Then his heart starts pounding harder, faster, like someone winding up a music box inside his chest. He holds his breath for a moment, suddenly shy, like a schoolboy.

Is this what it feels like to fall in love?

Damn Norawit Titicharoenrak. How does he do this to him without even trying?

Someone suddenly grabs Nattawat's hands and pulls him into a dance. A sweet elderly woman in a wide-brimmed hat twirls him around. He laughs, gives in, starts dancing, awkwardly, clumsily, but quickly realizes it doesn't matter. Nobody here cares. Everyone dances however they want.

She moves her hips like a pro, singing along, then spins under his raised arm.

"You're a charming gentleman," she laughs, placing her hat on his head.

"And you're an amazing partner," Nattawat replies, hugging her.

"It's lovely that you've made friends," Norawit says, stepping in. "But I'm stealing him. Sorry, he's mine."

"Non mi offendo, tesoro. È tutto tuo," the woman replies cheerfully in Italian, already dancing with someone else.

They laugh, spin together once more, then stop near a ride. Nattawat throws his head back, laughing so brightly, arms around Norawit's shoulders, that Norawit nearly melts.

His laughter is a cure. Ridiculous. Infectious. Perfect.

Impossible to resist.

And Norawit knows it.

Nattawat turns around and realizes they're standing right in front of the famous forty-meter Ferris wheel. Against the dark night sky, it looks unreal — nearly one hundred and sixty thousand LED lights illuminate it, making it glow like something out of a dream. Even more beautiful than the glossy tourist photos online.

Norawit is staring up at it too, head tilted back as he watches the cabins move. His eyes shine with pure, childlike wonder, and for a moment he looks like a little boy. Nattawat watches him instead, smiling at that unguarded excitement. He wonders when Norawit last allowed himself something as simple as amusement. His childhood ended far too early.

"Want to ride it?" Nattawat offers.

"We're not here for that," Norawit says with a mysterious smile. "Come on. We need to go to the beach. It's too loud and crowded here."

"Would you like to know your fate, young men?" a woman's voice suddenly calls out beside them.

They turn to see an odd elderly woman standing nearby. She's dressed like a witch or a fortune-teller — a long dress dragging lightly across the ground, arms covered in jingling jewelry, her hair wrapped in a colorful turban. Her dark skin contrasts sharply with her piercing green eyes, sharp and knowing. Clearly, she's not just another tourist — she's here to make money off curious strangers with her tricks.

“No. I don’t believe in that nonsense,” Norawit scoffs.

“Oh, come on,” Nattawat laughs, holding his hand. “Let’s hear her out. It’s entertaining. What can you tell us?”

“Draw a card,” the woman says, extending a black deck toward him. “I’ll interpret it, and you can decide for yourself how accurate I am.”

“Interesting,” he hums, glancing at Norawit.

“She’s a scammer, baby. Let’s go,” Norawit mutters.

“You’re more curious than he is,” the woman laughs softly, offering the cards again. “Care to take a risk? You get along well with cards.”

Nattawat narrows his eyes, catching the strange emphasis in her voice, then shrugs and pulls a card. He flips it over, and the woman smiles immediately. It depicts two figures resembling Adam and Eve, symbols etched around them.

“The Lovers,” she says. “How fascinating. Right now, you’re torn between your heart and your mind. You want love, but you’re afraid of it. You hesitate, struggle to choose, afraid to surrender to your feelings. But even at this crossroads, you’ll show remarkable strength. The choice you make will shape the course of your life. Choose wisely,” she adds with a wink.

“Wow,” Nattawat murmurs. “Not bad.”

“Oh please. That’s ridiculous,” Norawit sighs, rolling his eyes.

“Then why don’t you draw one too?” the woman suggests. “Nothing to lose if it’s nonsense, right?”

“Fine,” Norawit says, pulling one of the last remaining cards without much thought.

It shows a figure hanging upside down. The image is unsettling, heavy with meaning. Norawit smirks and looks at her boldly.

“And what does this mean? Imminent death?” he asks sarcastically.

“The Hanged Man,” she replies calmly. “A dead end. You’re under immense pressure in life — forced into choices, used by others. You’re trapped.”

She slips the cards back into her pocket.

“You’re facing serious trouble.”

“Oh really? And who isn’t?” Norawit scoffs, tossing her a single dollar coin. “Nice performance.”

“You’re in danger,” she warns quietly. “Both of you.”

“What kind of bullshit—?” Nattawat frowns.

“Some truths are better left unknown,” the woman says, meeting each of their eyes in turn.

“Let’s go. This is stupid,” Norawit says, tugging Nattawat toward the wooden steps.

“You can’t outrun fate,” the woman calls after them.

“I choose my own fate,” Norawit replies with a smile, saluting her. “Thanks.”

They head down to the sand, slipping off their shoes and walking barefoot along the shore. The cool Pacific water brushes their feet, sending shivers up their skin. The waves are calm but long, rolling gently and leaving winding patterns in the wet sand. Their feet sink slightly, leaving a trail of footprints behind them.

In the distance, the top of a massive circus tent rises, decorated with colorful flags. With each step away, the sounds of the fair grow quieter. Norawit leads him farther down the beach, toward a secluded stretch.

“She was strange, but kind of funny,” Nattawat chuckles. “Some things she said weren’t wrong.”

“Don’t read too much into it,” Norawit says. “She’s part of the show. Brings attention to the fair. Especially tonight.”

“What’s in the tent?” Nattawat asks. “A circus?”

“Yeah. Cirque du Soleil. Their final show is tonight. Hear that? After this, they leave on tour.”

Nattawat listens and hears faint fanfares, then applause. He’s heard so many stories about them — seeing their show has always been a childhood dream.

“You planned this, didn’t you?” he smiles, taking in the view.

“Maybe,” Norawit smirks.

“So why bring me here?” Nattawat asks, turning to him.

“Sit here,” Norawit says, pointing at the sand.

“And then?” Nattawat laughs.

“Lie down.”

“Trying to seduce me?” Nattawat jokes. “Not the best place. There are people everywhere.”

“No,” Norawit says softly. “I want you to see what makes me happy.”

“You’re strange,” Nattawat murmurs, lowering himself onto the warm sand. “But I like that.”

“I think you’ll like this,” Norawit says, lying beside him. “Trust me.”

“And once again, I do,” Nattawat sighs. “You wanted to show me the Santa Monica sky? It’s beautiful, sure — but it’s the same sky I see every day.”

“No. Just wait. Close your eyes. Relax.”

Nattawat obeys. He takes a deep breath and feels Norawit lace their fingers together. They lie in silence, listening to the ocean and the distant fair. Each lost in their own thoughts — yet both aware that tonight has brought them closer than ever before.

Nattawat hates admitting it, but Norawit has touched something deep inside him. His heart races when they’re together. Stops when he realizes how beautiful he is. He gets angry imagining Norawit with someone else. Misses him when they’re apart.

Damn it — Norawit has broken into his heart without asking.

“Titicharoenrak,” Nattawat whispers, turning toward him.

“What?”

“What if I talk to my dad about North’s situation?” he asks. “Do you think it could help?”

Norawit opens one eye, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“He’s a judge. He must know who to contact — a prosecutor, cops. If Lim really controls things through the police, maybe my dad knows how.”

“I hate to say it,” Norawit sighs, “but your dad is probably one of the people Lim pays to stay quiet. You said it yourself — corrupt judge, asshole.”

“Yeah,” Nattawat exhales, staring at the stars. “That was stupid. I’m just trying to find a way out.”

“You were really ready to ask him for help… for me?” Norawit asks quietly.

“I’d do more than that,” Nattawat replies. “You need help. I don’t want you facing this alone.”

“What are you planning?” Norawit narrows his eyes.

“He’ll leave you alone if you pay him, right?”

“His word isn’t a guarantee, but… he promised.”

“I thought about asking Night for money. Not enough. Then I thought about winning it.”

“Winning?” Norawit blinks.

“Yes.”

“Two and a half million?”

“No. But half is possible.”

“You don’t mean—” Norawit trails off. “Oh.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Why not? I’ve won big before. If we’re careful, we can get a portion. Vegas. I’m good at this.”

“You’re a gambler, Nattawat. No.”

“But it could help.”

“I won’t use you like that,” Norawit snaps, sitting up. “Who do you think I am?”

“I’m offering. You’re not using me.”

Norawit shakes his head. He knows Nattawat is weak to this. He’s fighting addiction — and still willing to risk it for him. It’s insane. And terrifying. And… admirable.

“I’ll play blackjack,” Nattawat murmurs, hugging him, face pressed into his neck. “It doesn’t trigger me much. It’s safe. Popular. Profitable.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I won’t relapse.”

“How do you know?”

“I won’t — if you’re with me.”

“Nattawat…” Norawit sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t think I can help you with that.”

“You underestimate your power over my heart,” Nattawat whispers. “If I lose control, one word from you and we walk away.”

“This is madness.”

“Yes. But it’s a chance. If you pay part of the debt, Lim might back off. Maybe you won’t have to race. That race terrifies me. And North won’t have to fight as much.”

“You’re playing dirty,” Norawit exhales.

“I know. But your brother is your weakness.”

“I don’t know,” Norawit shakes his head. “Your words make sense… but why would you do this for me? Why risk everything?”

“Because…” Nattawat hesitates, lashes fluttering. “Because you matter to me.”

“I matter?”

“Yes. We’re not just acquaintances. Not friends. What’s between us — it’s important. I don’t know how to say it. I need you. I’m scared of losing you.”

Norawit cups his face and kisses him softly.

Those words are everything.

Fireworks explode overhead — the circus finale. Nattawat gasps, pulling back, eyes lifting to the sky. Colors bloom and scatter above them, patterns so close they seem touchable.

Norawit watches him instead.

The colors dance across Nattawat’s face, his eyes glowing, lips parted in awe. Everything is perfect — the moment, the feelings, him.

And in that instant, Norawit realizes what truly makes him happy.

Not the fireworks.

But the boy beside him.

Nattawat Jirochtikul.

Chapter 7: VII

Halsey — Colors

Cigarettes after Sex — Holding you, Holding Me

The Weeknd — Less Than Zero

Night paces restlessly from one corner of the living room to the other, stopping only in front of the large sofa. His older brother rarely visits, and under normal circumstances he'd be genuinely happy to see him, but this time, the visit is anything but casual.

Nattawat sits hunched forward, elbows resting on his knees, absently scratching behind the ears of a small Dalmatian puppy. The dog is a recent purchase, Night's quiet attempt to fend off the crushing loneliness of an empty house. Nattawat gives him time to think over his modest request. For Nattawat, it wouldn't be difficult at all. What bothers him are the possible consequences, ones he clearly doesn't like.

Night glances at the second guest and exhales loudly, not bothering to hide his irritation that this man isn't stopping his brother from doing something utterly reckless.

Norawit Titicharoenrak — Nattawat's newest sexual, and possibly romantic, obsession.

Night treats him well, with genuine respect, but what annoys him is that Norawit is allowing this whole mess to unfold right now. Doesn't he care? North is an addict too, far more deeply than he lets on. Why the hell had Night even started digging up information on that problematic North Titicharoenrak? He didn't need to. Or did he?

He tells himself it's just curiosity. He wants to understand what kind of person North really is. Still, it feels strange, and he hates this sudden interest. Men like that are not his type at all: complicated, dangerous, always walking the razor's edge. Nothing good ever comes from people like that, or from relationships with them.

An alcoholic. A drug addict. Violent, unstable, impossible to control.

What could they possibly have in common, aside from two brothers hopelessly in love with their siblings?

Nothing. Obviously.

And yet… there's something about him that won't let Night rest. It isn't ordinary human sympathy. Maybe it's the face—pleasant, even pretty, when he smiles. Not when he's scowling like he's cursing the very existence of everything alive around him.

At the race, Night had seen that genuine smile for the first time.

And damn it, he liked it so much that he still couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Stop pacing, little brother," Nattawat says, lifting an annoyed gaze. "You're acting like I'm asking you for something supernatural."

Night pushes the unwanted thoughts away, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, wincing slightly. He drops into the armchair opposite the guests, near the small fireplace, and studies the insane pair once more.

"It's not what you're asking," he says after a few seconds. "It's what you've decided to do."

"Oh, come on. Everything will be fine."

"I'm completely against this," Night says, shaking his head. "This is a stupid idea. Do you really want to gamble again?"

"Yes."

Norawit had given in eventually.

Nattawat had pressed on the most painful and vulnerable point—his brother. If they managed to win at least some money and paid part of the debt, it would buy them time. Maybe Damian would calm down a little.

Nattawat was so calm, so convincing, saying that a visit to the citadel of vice wouldn't be a problem for him, that Norawit believed him.

Just like that, he believed the words of an addict.

He trusted him. He hoped that one game wouldn't make things worse. It was foolish, probably. Doubts still wrapped tight around his chest, but every time he looked into Nattawat's confident eyes, those thoughts collapsed like a house of cards.

Taking this risk terrified Norawit. It could ruin the person he cared about. The last thing he wanted was to drag Nattawat into more trouble.

But it would be even worse to live with the regret of not doing everything possible to save North.

"I didn't come here asking for permission," Nattawat says, rolling his eyes as he continues petting the puppy. "Just do what I asked. You're better at this than we are. And you've got a whole room full of stuff."

"Do you even realize this could trigger another relapse?" Night snaps, ignoring his careless tone. "And then what? Of course I'll help you and cover your ass, but what if it's hard for you to get back to a normal life again? How long has it been since you last gambled—six months? And you want to erase all that effort?"

“Stop it. I’ll be fine. A few rounds of blackjack won’t excite me, it’ll relax me. And even if I play one hand of poker, the world won’t end. Don’t dramatize.”

“What difference does it make what you play?!” Night fires back. “You want to go to a casino. You’re banned from them, in case you forgot. And the fact that every casino in this city has you blacklisted should tell you something, don’t you think? Where are you going to go, Vegas? Since you’re not banned there yet?”

“Wait, you're banned from casinos here?” Norawit asks, staring at Nattawat.

“Long story,” Nattawat mutters, cracking his neck.

“Oh, really?” Night smirks, crossing his leg and leaning back. “You didn’t tell him how you cleaned out half the casinos in the city?”

“I don’t do that anymore. Enough,” Nattawat sighs, mirroring his posture against the back of the couch.

“Of course you don’t. Because there’s nowhere left to do it. In illegal places they’d just kill you if they caught on.” Night turns to Norawit. “He’s a cheat. Ever heard of Lucky Thirteen?”

“No. I’m not into gambling,” Norawit replies. “Explain.”

“He was taught by—”

“I’ll tell it myself,” Nattawat interrupts, pressing his fingers to his temple. “Curtis Keeland, a well-known poker player in our city, was my mother’s lover for years. Honestly, he was the closest thing to family I had. He treated me kindly. Back then, he had nothing. He drank with her and lived for poker. We played at home all the time, and he taught me every trick he knew.

“One night, when my mother asked him to watch me, he took me to a real game. His rich friends thought it’d be funny to seat a kid at the table.”

“And?” Norawit asks when he pauses.

“I won,” Nattawat shrugs with a smug smile.

“How much?”

“About a quarter of a million. I took the whole pot.”

“Holy shit,” Norawit mutters, eyes wide. “You won two hundred and fifty thousand dollars as a kid?”

“Yes,” Night adds. “He even beat his own teacher that night.”

“How old were you?” Norawit asks.

“Thirteen.”

“Lucky Thirteen—that’s why?”

“Curtis gave me the nickname. It was the first time he’d lost in years. Losing to a thirteen-year-old was unreal to him,” Nattawat nods slowly. “He said I took his luck.”

No wonder.

So Nattawat isn’t just some reckless gambler, he’s a seasoned card shark who knows every dirty secret of the game. Someone who crushed grown men at thirteen with raw talent alone.

Norawit stares at him in stunned silence. This goes far deeper than he’d imagined. Now Night’s reaction makes perfect sense.

“Curtis owns a casino now,” Nattawat continues, running a hand through his hair. “And it’s the only one I’ve never played at.”

“Why?” Norawit asks.

“I gave him the money I won that same night. He opened his first place with it. I didn’t really understand the value back then, adults handled money. I thought of him as a stepfather. He quit drinking, didn’t gamble it away, and he’s doing great now.

“He told me, ‘When you grow up and hear that I’m rich, don’t come play at my place. All your tricks are my tricks. Our game would never end.’ Then he left my mother. That was it.”

“And now you want to go play there?” Night frowns. “I saw him a few years ago, he didn’t even ask about you. Why would he let you in?”

“He might not remember me. But his casino is the only one I can walk into. And it’s fair, blackjack is against the house. And that house was built with my money,” Nattawat shrugs. “I’m just taking back what’s mine.”

“Why do you even need money?” Night demands. “What did you get yourselves into? Tell me. I’ll help, you know I always have.”

“It’s complicated. This is a last resort.”

“This is stupid,” Night sighs, running a hand through his hair.

“With or without you, I’m doing it—”

“It’s for North,” Norawit says quietly, eyes fixed on the floor.

The spoiled rich idiot, as he had called him on their first meeting, looks at him sharply. Nattawat and Norawit both see his expression soften instantly, worry flooding his eyes.

“Is he in trouble again?” Night asks, forcing neutrality.

“Debt,” Norawit answers.

“How much?”

“Two and a half million.”

“Fuck,” Night exhales. “I’d help if I could, but I don’t have that kind of money. Not even if I sold my car.”

“I thought about asking you,” Nattawat admits. “But even you have limits. And Norawit wouldn’t let me drag you into debt.”

“That’s more than my entire net worth,” Night mutters.

“He’s fighting for money now, literally. To pay it off. I’m stuck in this with him,” Norawit says. “I’d never push your brother into something like this if there were another option. I’m scared too. But North is the only family I have. Every fight could be his last. He relapses sometimes. The longer this goes on, the harder it’ll be for him to escape. I have no other way. And yes, I’m being selfish, but I’ll take this chance for him. You’d do the same for your brother.”

Night exhales deeply, defeated.

He sees it now: the resolve, the fear, the sincerity. They’re both ready to sacrifice anything for their brothers.

So this is all about that aggressive bastard who trashed his bar.

Looks like he’s in deeper shit this time. But at least now, his army just grew—by two.

“Fine,” Night murmurs. “I’ll help. On one condition.”

“Name it,” Nattawat says.

“No poker. Only blackjack. And only a few times.”

“Deal.”

“Deal?” Night squints.

“Want me to swear on the Bible?” Nattawat arches a brow.

“No. I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“With your track record, you do.”

Night’s house stood in Beverly Hills, more precisely, in one of the most luxurious suburbs of Los Angeles. At first glance, the neighborhood looked deserted, almost lifeless, but cameras watched every movement from behind columns and quiet corners. After all, this was where

the most famous movie stars, tycoons, decorated athletes, and high-ranking politicians lived. Life in a place like this was inseparable from display and excess. Perhaps that was exactly why Night had bought a house here, to prove to his father that he was truly worth something.

Modesty clearly had no place here. The streets were wider and meticulously maintained, the air noticeably cleaner, the palm trees casting deeper shade. Flowerbeds and gardens burst with color. The sight of exclusive luxury cars parked along the streets made one's eyes blur. Buildings resembling opulent palaces or bold pieces of modern art amazed with their scale and beauty.

Night's house was breathtaking from the outside and no less magnificent within. The light Italian interior made the space feel larger than it truly was, while the expansive windows flooded every room with California sunlight from morning until evening. It looked like something straight out of a high-end design magazine. Modern finishing materials in soft beige and white tones harmonized beautifully with the green lawn and living hedge outside. Inside, everything was just as luxurious, but without a trace of vulgarity or pretension. The house felt warm, almost tender, and nothing like the arrogant mansions of the wealthy people who mostly lived in this area.

Perhaps it was smaller than the neighboring houses and lacked a tennis court, a massive underground garage, or a pool, but it had a charm of its own. It felt like a cozy family nest rather than the home of a bachelor. There was warmth here, real warmth.

Usually, the comfort of a lonely person lies in convenience and modernity, and for a rich loner it often combines beauty with emptiness. Like a cardboard house filled with expensive toys. But this place was different. Paintings on the walls, photographs, books, various trinkets, and certificates of the young man's athletic achievements, likely from school or university. Fresh flowers, silk cushions, plush carpets, soft furniture. It was obvious how much love the owner poured into this house, investing both effort and money.

They followed Night up a wide white staircase with elegant carved wooden railings and found themselves in the second-floor hall. The spacious landing formed a small balcony from which part of the first floor and the front door were visible. Night led them through a short corridor lit by a beautiful crystal chandelier to the farthest door near a window overlooking the backyard, and opened it.

Nattawat calmly walked past his brother and wasn't surprised at all by what he saw inside. He had seen it before. He merely tilted his head slightly, smirked, and took in the refined room. Norawit, on the other hand, widened his eyes and parted his lips in fleeting shock.

The walk-in closet looked like an expensive men's boutique on Rodeo Drive. Cabinets with frosted glass sliding doors stretched along an entire wall. In one, perfectly pressed shirts, trousers, blazers, and other classic pieces hung neatly arranged by color. In another, T-shirts and sweaters lay stacked in tidy piles, while a few leather jackets hung alone in the corner. Shoes of every style and color stood in pairs on shelves from floor to ceiling. Opposite them was a full-length mirror and a dresser with accessories—watches, glasses, ties—all laid out in precise rows, striking in their elegance.

Everything was so immaculate and conveniently arranged that any perfectionist would have gone into raptures. The finishing touch was the soft glow of hidden lighting. Titicharoenrak had only ever seen something like this in movies. It was genuinely impressive. And even though he had no desire to wear most of the clothes hanging there, no sane person would refuse to have a room like this in their home.

He awkwardly studied his reflection in the large mirror and wiped his slightly sweaty palms on his jeans. None of this felt real. What the hell was he even doing in a house like this, in a neighborhood like this? Never in his life had he seen luxury this close, and now he was about to dress like that rich jerk who had first struck him as an arrogant asshole.

Night stepped up to one of the open shirt racks and began flipping through the clothes, pushing some aside while casting an appraising look at him. He needed something as simple and refined as possible. He pulled out a brand-new shirt and motioned for him to come closer.

Norawit frowned, clearly displeased, but still obeyed. Night held a black shirt against his chest, wrinkled his nose in dissatisfaction, and reached for another. He repeated this several times before settling on a classic white one, then selected trousers, a blazer, and shoes. He shoved everything into Norawit's arms and gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Is all of this really necessary? I've never worn anything like this, and I don't want to. I'll look like a clown," Titicharoenrak grumbled.

"It is," Nattawat replied, examining the designer shoes on the shelves. "Casinos expect a presentable appearance, and the place we're going is pretty popular. We can't exactly show up looking like we've got a thousand dollars between the two of us and plan to gamble with that."

"I already hate this."

"Go get changed. I'll deal with my brother," Nattawat said, nodding encouragingly.

Titicharoenrak sighed in resignation and went to the other side of the closet, separated by a thick screen. He stared uncertainly at the clothes in his hands, feeling inexplicably awkward. This was strange. He rarely felt embarrassed, but now the feeling gripped him so tightly that his hands trembled slightly. The clothes were too expensive, too beautiful, almost a shame to put them on when they didn't suit him at all. Yes, he didn't suit them. Not the other way around.

Luxury like this was foreign to Norawit, and he felt out of place in it. But Nattawat was right. Places like this judged by appearances, and if they showed up in jeans and leather jackets, they wouldn't even be allowed through the door.

He laid the clothes out on a black velvet ottoman and slowly began to change, half-listening to Nattawat's playful protests as Night picked an outfit for him as well. The delicate fabric wrapped around Norawit's body, and he couldn't help but smile. Fine, he could admit it. It felt nice. The material slid so easily over his skin that goosebumps ran down his spine. He had no idea what it was made of, but it was nothing like what he wore every day.

He struggled with the cuffs for nearly a minute before finally winning that small battle.

He and Night were nearly the same height and build, so the fit was almost perfect. The black trousers were a bit tight around his ass, but the shirt sat looser on the shoulders, and the blazer would hide that. He slipped into the painfully uncomfortable shoes and straightened the folds of his clothes, standing up straight.

Why did something so simple make him feel this embarrassed? He slowly scanned himself in the mirror and suddenly realized he didn't want anyone to see him like this. As if it were some secret, like exposing a small vulnerability. Even he didn't want to look at himself this way.

"Hey, baby, did you fall asleep in there?" Nattawat called.

"No," Norawit replied, staring at the polished shoes on his feet.

"Why's it taking so long? Did your gorgeous ass not fit into the pants?"

"It fit. Just a bit tight," he answered, running his palms over his hips.

"Not surprising. My brother clearly can't compete with that."

Norawit smiled, smoothing the soft fabric of the black blazer.

"Trouble with the cuffs?" Nattawat asked again.

"No, I managed," Norawit sighed, rotating his wrists and examining the buttons.

"Then come out and show me. I'm sure you look like Prince Eric."

"Y-yeah," Norawit replied softly, swallowing nervously. "One second."

"That tone is weird. Something wrong? Can't figure out the zipper?"

"Fuck off, I'm not that dumb," Norawit laughed.

"Come on. I'm ready to be slain by your beauty."

"I just feel kind of…"

"Weird?" Nattawat prompted.

"Yeah."

"That's normal. What you're seeing is very different from what you're used to seeing in the mirror. That doesn't mean it's bad. Just try looking at yourself from another angle. I'm sure you're stunning."

"I get it, but…" Titicharoenrak hesitated, rubbing his forehead. "Okay. I'm coming."

“You’re beautiful, Norawit. Always,” Nattawat said, adjusting the collar of his own white shirt while looking into the mirror. “No matter what you’re wearing. Believe me, fresh off the pillow, you’re flawless. Ideally naked, of course, but you’re insanely sexy in your leather pants or ripped jeans. Your ass and thighs look unreal in them. You look bold in that favorite jacket of yours. I like it, even with those flashy studs. And you’re adorable in an oversized hoodie and Converse. The way you hide your hands in the sleeves and drown in the hood, it’s cute as hell. It doesn’t matter what you wear. You’re always breathtaking. So much that it steals my breath. I think it’s because of your—”

Nattawat abruptly fell silent when he saw Norawit in the mirror behind him.

Norawit walked up quietly and stopped behind him, hands tucked into his pockets, offering a crooked smile. Nattawat’s fingers froze, suddenly refusing to move, and an involuntary, awed breath slipped from his lips. In that moment, he realized he had never seen anyone more beautiful than Norawit Titicharoenrak.

He was flawless. Different, but beautiful in his own way. Nattawat had never seen him like this before, and damn it all, he was so stunning that Nattawat forgot how to breathe. The classic black suit fit him perfectly, as if it had been tailored just for him. The white shirt highlighted the warm tone of his honey-colored skin, while the light brown hair reminded him exactly who stood before him, the same charming bastard who rode a motorcycle and had seemingly stolen his heart for good.

“Because of my…?” Norawit asked, waiting for the end of Nattawat’s sentence.

“I—I…” Nattawat whispered, turning to face him. “Idiot. I forgot what I was going to say.”

“So it suits me, if you’re speechless?” Norawit smiled charmingly.

Nattawat’s knees nearly buckled at that small detail. That smile was the cherry on top, not just completing the image, but making it absolutely perfect. Thank God Night had left the room and didn’t witness Nattawat’s brain melting into a shapeless puddle on the floor, or he’d never hear the end of it.

“So, how do I look?” Norawit asked, glancing at his reflection.

“Like my future husband on our wedding day,” Nattawat muttered without thinking, still staring.

“What?” Norawit laughed, looking at him.

“What?” Nattawat blinked rapidly, raking a hand through his hair.

“What did you say?”

“You look great.”

“I’m pretty sure I heard something else,” Titicharoenrak said, smiling smugly.

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t,” Nattawat replied, his cheeks tinting pink.

Norawit gently wrapped an arm around his waist and carefully brushed his knuckles over the faintly flushed skin of his cheekbone, admiring him. Nattawat slowly lifted his gaze, and Norawit saw an entire universe in his eyes: countless stars shining brightly, illuminating everything around them. They were so pure, kind, admiring, and devastatingly beautiful. He would give anything to have those eyes look at him like this every day.

His greatest desire was to fall in love with them, to see happiness light up inside that dark iris. He wanted to drown in them again and again, waking up and falling asleep beside him. To lose himself hopelessly in them when Nattawat shattered under the storm of passion between them.

Was that really too much to ask?

Not at all. It was such a small thing, but only the man standing before him could give it to him. The same man who didn't want to get attached. Didn't want to fall in love.

But it was already too late, and Norawit knew it.

And Nattawat knew he stood on that thin, dangerous line beyond which there was no turning back. Maybe it would be easier to step forward and let himself be carried by the current of life. But he was afraid, so damn afraid. His heart was going crazy in his chest from Titicharoenrak's closeness, and he lied to himself, claiming these feelings weren't that strong.

But his heart knew the truth. And his mind cursed the foolish organ for it.

You shouldn't get this attached. You shouldn't give yourself so blindly. They barely knew each other. You shouldn't love, it hurts too much.

You shouldn't. But resisting was impossible. No one could just switch off their emotions like the engine of a Mustang. That's not how it worked. Not at all.

Norawit took a small step closer, closing the distance, and Nattawat's hands immediately slid along his arms and shoulders, wrapped in expensive fabric, before looping around his neck. Just from standing this close, enormous butterflies started fluttering in his stomach, like some pathetic rom-com heroine in love. It scared him. And yet… he loved the feeling.

Norawit slowly traced the face before him with a curious gaze, then shyly brushed the tip of his nose against Nattawat's cheek. He nudged it gently to the side, touched their noses together, swaying his head slightly. So tenderly, so lightly, he brushed warm lips against the corner of Nattawat's mouth, his breath ghosting over them, sending goosebumps racing from head to toe. He glided his lips over Nattawat's cheek, leaving behind a kiss so soft it felt fragile, then brushed his lips over his nose and kissed the very tip.

He pulled him closer and held him with impossible tenderness, like a priceless treasure entrusted to his care.

Nattawat had no idea what was happening to him. It was overwhelming and intimate. Every cell in his body trembled awake from a long sleep because of this careful affection,

something Norawit had never shown him before. His mind was completely blank. No thoughts. Just sensation.

A deep shiver rippled through his body, warmth tingling in his fingertips. He slid his palms over Norawit's chest, lightly gripping the fabric of his shirt as a quiet sigh escaped him. He didn't know how to handle himself. Desire and tenderness churned inside him like molten lava, and it was incredible.

For the first time in his life, he felt wanted, despite the fact that Norawit wasn't doing anything overt. Wasn't that madness?

"Kiss me," Nattawat whispered, staring at his full lips.

The corner of Norawit's mouth twitched in a half-smile. He placed a hand over Nattawat's and gently squeezed it, stroking the velvety skin. He watched every emotion, listened to every breath. Giving him feelings like this was a privilege, because he was the first. And the only one.

Nattawat watched in quiet awe, lips parted, breathing shallowly, afraid to scare away what he was feeling. Afraid, but savoring it.

Norawit lifted Nattawat's hand to his lips and softly kissed each knuckle in turn, then the pad of every finger, finishing with one gentle kiss in the center of his palm.

"What are you doing?" the guy asks in surprise, suddenly feeling tears prick his eyes for a few seconds. He quickly blinks them away, fluttering his lashes.

"I'm giving you something no one else has given you in all these years," Norawit whispers, brushing his lips lightly against the sharp line of his jaw, laying a trail of kisses from his chin up to his ear.

"And what is that?" Nattawat asks with effort, exhaling softly.

"Tenderness. It's tenderness, baby," he murmurs between kisses. "And I can be like this for you, if you want. With you, I'm ready to be anything, just as long as you stay by my side."

"But I'm already here with you."

"You know what I mean," Titicharoenrak replies, not stopping his kisses.

"Norawit…" Nattawat whispers, closing his eyes and surrendering to the trembling touch of lips against his neck, "but I'm not—"

"Just say it. Right now. Just once. That will be enough for me. I'm not asking for much, I know how hard it is for you to talk about feelings, to show them. But I need to know. I don't want to fall in love with someone who will never truly be mine," he breathes against his ear. "I want all of him, not just his body. I need everything he is. I'm too much of a possessive bastard."

"Are you… falling in love with me?" Nattawat asks quietly.

“Hopelessly. Completely. But how far this goes, that’s up to you, understand? I will never force myself on you. My heart is just as fragile as yours,” he says softly, sliding a palm over Nattawat’s chest and feeling the heavy, pounding beats beneath his hand. “I promise to take care of yours, if you don’t break mine. Please, love me. Don’t be afraid of it. We both need this. You know you can’t go a single day without me anymore.”

“Yes,” Nattawat whispers, melting into his gentle arms.

“I think about you every day. Every damn day. Twenty-four hours a day. There used to be no room in my head or my heart for anyone but my brother. But you—” Norawit says, placing his hands on Nattawat’s neck, tenderly stroking the pulsing artery with his thumb, “—you don’t let me live in peace, Natt. I want to have you completely. But you’re not mine. And you don’t want to be, even though you like me so much.”

“No,” Nattawat replies, brushing his fingertips over Norawit’s cheek. “I’m already yours, I just don’t want to admit it. I’ve belonged to you since the moment I crossed my own principles and kissed you, even though you reeked of fucking gin from a mile away. You make me live differently. And I like it. I really do.”

“Say it again,” Titicharoenrak asks, barely touching his lips to Nattawat’s.

“I’m yours,” Nattawat says, smiling shyly as he strokes his cheekbone.

“Again.”

“I’m yours. Yes, I’m terrified, you’re right. But if you promise to protect my heart, I’ll never hurt yours. You know relationships mean something special to me. You know I need every brick to build happiness. So let’s make this our happily ever after, putting them together one by one. I don’t want to lose you, or what lives between us.”

“You’ll say that in your wedding vows to me in five years, deal?” Norawit grins.

“You’re such an idiot,” Nattawat whispers, smiling back.

“Yeah, but a hopelessly in-love idiot,” he answers softly.

Nattawat pulls him closer and covers his plush lips with his own. The kiss is completely unexpected, different from anything before, with not a hint of vulgarity. It’s gentle and trembling, sealing all the important words they’ve finally said to each other. Titicharoenrak quickly takes the lead, carefully claiming his lips. He wants to show this boy just how many forms affection, care, and tenderness can take, things he has never truly known. And he does it beautifully.

Nattawat feels those emotions pouring from him and, in his arms, feels like something precious. An unexplainable warmth fills him as Norawit tenderly alternates between his lower and upper lip, never trying to deepen the kiss. It turns out that being kissed without it leading to sex can be just as intoxicating. No one has ever made him feel so much all at once. It’s an avalanche, a typhoon. He hears his own heart pounding loudly in the silence of the room. His legs go slightly numb from the overwhelming rush of emotion, almost buckling

beneath him. He hides the faint tremble in his hands by sliding them around Norawit's waist, under his jacket.

These seemingly ordinary feelings open up a completely new side of human connection for him, one he's never known before. Is it really possible to want to touch someone this badly, to crave closeness for endless hours, just because of one simple kiss? To tremble so violently in someone's arms from emotions tearing you apart? To dive headfirst, without looking back, and give away your heart so easily?

It is. And Norawit Titicharoenrak has just shown him how.

Nattawat slowly pulls away from his lips and exhales softly. He realizes that this boy has broken through a wall inside him, one he's spent his entire life building to protect himself from unnecessary pain. How was this possible? How could he allow himself such weakness?

The answer is simple—reciprocity.

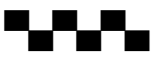
The one person who wanted his affection so desperately had finally earned it. Norawit gave himself completely and received the same in return. He took steps toward him with absolute trust, working patiently to earn his. He understood him, and was understood beside him. And Nattawat did the same, perhaps not as openly or obviously, but he tried to give him everything he had. His real self.

Reciprocity in human relationships truly matters, it's a shared effort between two people, whether it's love, friendship, or the bond between a mother and her child. No matter how hard you try, if you don't receive even a drop in return, everything is meaningless. And Nattawat understands that now, thanks to the boy holding him and kissing him.

"Thank you," he says quietly, lowering his head and pressing his nose into the deep hollow between Norawit's shoulder and neck, scented sweetly like watermelon.

"For what?" Titicharoenrak asks in surprise, kissing his hair.

"For being you," Nattawat answers, smiling in love.



The following evening, their small plan began right at the grand entrance of Curtis Keeland's casino, aptly named Divine. Night had brought them there in his sleek Martin and had gone off to greet some important people at the restaurant on the first floor of the massive entertainment complex.

A gambling establishment like this wasn't merely a discreet, exclusive club for the wealthy and influential, it was a place of leisure. City aristocrats, millionaires, and local crime figures gathered here to gamble, to socialize with those of equal standing, and sometimes even to strike serious deals.

Norawit was visibly nervous. He kept adjusting the sleeves of his suit jacket, eyes darting curiously to everything around him. It was his first time in a place this luxurious, and once again, he felt out of place. Nattawat, on the other hand, stood relaxed in the middle of the hall, hands tucked into his trouser pockets, studying the breathtaking ceiling. It rose high above them like a dome, adorned with elegant gold-leaf molding, and at its center stretched a stunning fresco.

As was customary in casinos, there were no clocks and no windows, meant to make players lose track of time. Instead, the pale walls were decorated with copper sconces and paintings. Massive crystal chandeliers illuminated the space, reminiscent of Versailles itself. The bar and an opulent restaurant occupied most of the first floor, while farther down the corridor lay the entrance to the gaming area. Security blended seamlessly into the crowd, unobtrusive and nearly invisible.

Curtis clearly hadn't wasted his time. He'd settled in perfectly here, the casino looked magnificent. In a way, Nattawat felt glad for him. It meant that the money he'd once won hadn't gone to waste and had allowed him to start a new life. He wondered how much Curtis had changed since their last meeting, and whether he would even recognize him.

The crowd truly was pretentious and arrogant. Overfed millionaires stood around with young women on their arms, discussing business. Lovers, escorts, it was hard to tell. There were also older women, far less pleasant: self-sufficient, hardened, their flat faces ruined by countless plastic surgeries. They were the worst, women who considered everyone around them unworthy of their elite presence.

A few of these women stood off to the side in expensive dresses dripping with diamonds, openly whispering as they stared at Norawit. His bold gaze clearly unsettled them, a bright splash against the dull gray mass around him. He attracted too much attention. Some looks were curious, intrigued, but others reeked of open disdain.

Norawit already felt uncomfortable and tried not to show it, but the stares only made things worse. He hated being seen as lesser just because he didn't have millions in his bank account. No one would like that, especially in a place like this, where the feeling cut particularly deep.

But he had to endure it. They were here for something important.

He exhaled heavily, lowering his head, his jaw tightening as tension flickered through his clenched muscles.

"Don't," Nattawat whispered, gently hooking a finger under Norawit's chin and lifting it. He stepped closer, pretending to straighten the collar of Norawit's pristine white shirt. "Don't show your vulnerability, sexy. Stop winding yourself up so much."

"I'm trying," Norawit muttered, casting an irritated glance around them.

Nattawat slipped the thin hair tie from his own wrist, the one he usually kept for tying his hair back, and placed it around Norawit's wrist instead. His fingers lingered, stroking Norawit's warm skin with quiet care.

"I'm always with you. Remember that. If it gets too hard, count your breaths. And if even breathing feels impossible, snap the band and let it go. It'll ground you. Don't mind the looks, someone will always see you like garbage no matter what. You're above that. You're a beautiful man with an incredible aura."

"And you're mine."

"Yes," Nattawat smirked, fixing Norawit's hair. "Yours."

"They don't shake my confidence," Norawit said quietly, "but they're so damn annoying. They stare like I'm some kind of lunatic."

"I get it. I don't like these people either," Nattawat replied. "But we're not here for them, are we? So chin up. You have just as much right to be here as they do."

He smiled and brushed a light kiss against Norawit's lips.

"I know," Norawit said softly, then hesitated. "But… are you sure you'll be okay? That's all I care about."

"I'm sure," Nattawat nodded.

"Alright," Norawit whispered, taking a tense breath. "Like we agreed, if either of us gives the signal, we leave immediately. No trouble."

"I remember."

"You haven't played in a long time. How do you feel? Nervous?"

"Well…" Nattawat drawled thoughtfully, then smirked. "The last time I played was the night we met."

"But Night said you haven't played for six months," Norawit said, eyeing him suspiciously.

"For money," Nattawat clarified.

"And what did you play for, then? Strip poker?" Norawit asked, eyebrow arching.

Nattawat shrugged. "Dares."

"Dares? Like what?"

"Stealing gas. Or a headlight," he said casually, flicking Norawit's chin and winking.

"So that's why," Norawit laughed quietly. "Poker made you do it. You son of a bitch."

Nattawat smiled innocently, mischief dancing in his eyes. He'd found an alternative to playing for money, not a great one, but mistakes happen. It seemed he'd stopped altogether now. Which meant it mattered.

And now he was about to risk everything again.

"So you didn't play at all while we were together?" Norawit asked.

"Correct."

"Why?"

"I think it's because I found a new addiction," Nattawat said with a smile.

"An addiction, huh," Norawit smirked smugly.

"Hey, lovebirds, enough flirting," Night interrupted, approaching them and handing over a few chips.

"I have my own money," Nattawat muttered, hands in his pockets.

"And if you lose the first round?"

"Do you really know me so poorly?" Nattawat laughed, clapping his brother on the shoulder. "I won't."

He winked and headed toward the gaming hall.

Night sighed deeply, shaking his head with a smile. Hopeless. Always confident, sometimes too much. Norawit watched Nattawat's dark head disappear through the open doors, smiling despite himself. Nattawat walked with effortless ease, utterly at home here. His dangerously attractive aura stirred decidedly indecent thoughts.

"I get why you look at him like that," Night said.

"Like what?" Norawit scoffed.

"Like you're in love."

He continued softly, speaking of Nattawat's strength, his kindness, his contradictions, how he could be both a shield and a storm, cruel only when met with cruelty, capable of giving an entire world in return for kindness. How Norawit had managed to break through walls no one else could.

"He's amazing," Norawit whispered, smiling. "Falling for him was inevitable."

"Yes," Night agreed quietly. "And… I'm sorry. I overheard part of your conversation in the cloakroom."

"It's okay," Norawit said softly. "I don't hide what I feel for him."

“I just wanted to say thank you,” Night replied, gently squeezing his shoulder. “You know why.”

“I do,” Norawit nodded, meeting his gaze.

“Alright then. Let’s go — we can’t take our eyes off him,” Night smiled, exhaling deeply. “And here. Have some fun. Blackjack’s a simple game. Listen to the rules, and if you feel like it, try playing too. Who knows, maybe now you’re our lucky thirteen?”

He tossed Norawit an orange chip.

Night drifted off again to greet someone else, and Norawit followed Nattawat deeper inside. He turned his head in every direction, admiring the interior and trying to acclimate. The stares had grown less obvious, allowing him to finally breathe and sink into the atmosphere.

Alongside the many works of art on the walls and the marble statues lining the corridor, a small fountain stood at its center, a sculpture of a woman rising from it. Symbolically, it marked the boundary between the bar and restaurant area and the gaming zone beyond.

Nattawat waited for him there, casually surveying the room. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a hall filled with slot machines — rows of blinking lights, enticing chairs, buttons begging to be pressed. In another room, he spotted familiar green-felt tables and the roulette wheel.

For a few seconds, his heart clenched anxiously, remembering how easily the thrill of gambling could pull him under. But this time had to be different. He couldn’t let Norawit down.

“That way,” he said, tilting his head toward the poker room.

“Are you ready?” Norawit asked softly, stepping closer. “We can back out right now. You don’t have to do this.”

“I am,” Nattawat said. “But let’s take the risk. We’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Baby Natt?” a male voice called from nearby.

Both of them turned at once.

“Well, I’ll be damned — ‘Lucky Thirteen’ in the last casino that would ever let him in. Am I dreaming?”

A man around forty-five, dressed in an expensive suit, approached them with an easy, confident smile. His dark hair was threaded with gray and slicked back carelessly, as though he ran a hand through it often. His face was sharp and gaunt, cheekbones prominent, and his hazel eyes shone with genuine surprise.

“Who is that?” Norawit whispered, instantly tense, eyes flicking between the stranger and Nattawat.

“Curtis,” Nattawat replied, his lips twitching with a barely visible smile.

“Hello, you little menace. It’s been a long time,” the man said warmly.

“At least seven years,” Nattawat answered.

“I remember you very differently. Look at you now — a shaved eyebrow, that defiant look. What kind of bad boy grew out of that awkward kid with huge deer eyes who loved gnawing on fresh vegetables?”

“That kid grew up,” Nattawat replied coolly, “and now he bites anyone he doesn’t like. You haven’t changed much yourself — except you traded alcohol for a decent cologne.”

“You’re right. I kicked that habit long ago,” Curtis laughed. “So what, decided to risk everything again?”

“When you’ve got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose. You taught me that.”

“I warned you not to come play here once you grew up,” Curtis said sternly, looking him over with lifted chin.

“And you really think you can forbid me?” Nattawat shot back with a grin. “I do whatever I want.”

“I’ve improved my skills over the years.”

“And I haven’t wasted my time either.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t let you in at all?”

“Don’t forget — I was the one who flicked you on the nose. And this place was built with my money. Be grateful I’m not demanding a cut — I just came to clean you out a little and take back what’s mine.”

“You’re still a bastard,” Curtis laughed, stepping forward.

He pulled Nattawat into a firm embrace, patting his shoulder, then brushing a hand along the back of his neck like an old friend. He held him longer than expected, as if he truly missed him. Watching this, Norawit felt an unexpected warmth in his chest — it was comforting to see someone value Nattawat so deeply.

Nattawat hugged him back just as tightly, emotion swelling inside him. They hadn’t seen each other since Curtis left his mother — since the illusion of family fell apart. Still, Nattawat owed him a lot. And Curtis welcoming him like this meant there were still good memories left between them.

“I’m sorry about Esther,” Curtis said quietly. “I heard what happened. I wanted to support you, but your father took you away… I didn’t want to interfere.”

“I’m sorry too,” Nattawat replied. “You should’ve interfered — I grew up in hell. But you didn’t have to. It’s okay.”

“She wasn’t the best mother,” Curtis said gently, “but she loved you. Forgive her someday.”

“I’m trying. Maybe one day.”

Curtis smoothed a hand over Nattawat’s hair, then stepped back, smiling brightly again. There was so much kindness in his eyes that Norawit finally relaxed. Whoever Curtis was, he wasn’t a threat.

Only then did Curtis turn his attention to Norawit, studying him from head to toe. His hazel eyes narrowed thoughtfully before he hummed in approval.

“Introduce us?” he asked, glancing at Nattawat with a knowing smile.

“This is Norawit. He’s with me.”

“A gambler too?”

“No,” Norawit smirked. “I’m a dedicated alcoholic.”

“He’s joking,” Nattawat said, elbowing him lightly.

“Then we’re colleagues,” Curtis laughed. “Though I’ve retired — and I recommend you do the same.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Handsome, witty, and unmistakably himself. You’ve got a good companion,” Curtis said warmly. “I already like him.”

“I’m lucky,” Nattawat admitted, looking away shyly.

“Actually, I’m his boyfriend,” Norawit said, offering his hand. “He still hasn’t gotten used to that.”

“Oh?” Curtis raised a brow as he shook it. “Baby Natt, you little devil. What — not even a virgin anymore?”

“Fuck off,” Nattawat muttered, smiling.

“Couldn’t resist,” Curtis laughed. “So, shall we play?”

“Yes,” Nattawat nodded.

“I’ll find a table for you.”

“For three. My brother’s here too.”

“Night?” Curtis blinked in surprise.

“Yes.”

“Well then,” Curtis spread his hands, nodding, “for three. Just be careful with poker, Lucky Thirteen. What if my luck turns against you?”

He winked and gestured toward the poker room.

The boys exchanged glances — and followed him.

The poker room felt calmer, more intimate. There was a pleasant warmth to the atmosphere — the kind that gently coaxed guests into staying until their last chips were gone. People lounged comfortably at the tables, sipping drinks, drawing lazily on cigars, tempting fate. Soft jazz flowed through the room, accompanied by a raspy voice drifting from a small stage in the background.

Whether by chance or design, Keeland had clearly put special care into this space. The balance between restrained, businesslike elegance and a lavish fairytale luxury was perfect. Massive columns, ornate chandeliers, and dark carpets laid over marble floors held the eye — right up until the moment you sat down to play.

The casino owner kindly offered them an empty table and joined them himself. A young dealer represented the house tonight. As soon as they took their seats, a waitress approached to offer drinks. Nattawat declined immediately, and Keeland smiled knowingly. Norawit refused as well — he knew all too well how easily alcohol could ruin everything.

“So,” Curtis asked pleasantly, “what are we playing, gentlemen?”

“Blackjack,” Nattawat replied.

“Cheating on old poker, Baby Natt?” Curtis chuckled slyly, pulling multicolored chips from his jacket pocket.

“Our relationship is… complicated,” Nattawat said dryly.

“I get it. I’ve never managed to shake that friend myself. Are you both playing?”

“No,” Norawit answered.

“Don’t know how?”

“I know the basics.”

“To win, you need to score as close to twenty-one as possible without going over — and beat the dealer,” Curtis explained, stacking black chips and sliding them toward the dealer. “Cards from two to ten are worth their face value. Jacks, queens, and kings count as ten. If your total hits twenty-one exactly, an ace counts as eleven. If it goes over, the ace drops to one. Suit doesn’t matter.”

“Pretty simple,” Norawit said, intrigued.

“Blackjack’s a game for cowards,” Curtis smirked. “Real men play poker.”

“Don’t provoke me,” Nattawat warned, placing his bet. “I’m trying to quit poker.”

“You know I’m right. Even my five-year-old could play blackjack.”

“The same one who cleaned you out at Christmas?” Nattawat scoffed. “You’re a terrible player.”

“I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“I’m playing too,” Night said, sitting beside Norawit. “Hi, Curt.”

“Night,” Curtis nodded politely. “Good to see you. It’s been a while.”

“Five years, give or take. Likewise, old man — you’re looking better,” Night smiled, placing his chips down.

“I’m playing,” Norawit added — earning an annoyed look from his boyfriend.
“It’s fine,” he murmured. “I’ll just try.”

Nattawat stared at him, dark eyes drilling into his face. This wasn’t part of the plan. What the hell was he doing?

Norawit reached out, resting a hand on Nattawat’s thigh, stroking gently in reassurance.

“Relax,” he whispered. “I don’t have a problem with this.”

Nattawat exhaled heavily but settled as the game began.

The dealer handed out two cards to each player, then dealt himself two and revealed one. Everyone checked their hands, glanced at the dealer’s card, then at each other. One by one, decisions were made — stand or hit.

Nattawat studied his cards. Fifteen. A strong number — possibly enough, if the others fell short. Now came the choice: risk it and push forward, or hold and hope.

Curtis thought for a moment, brows knitting, then lightly scraped his cards across the table. The dealer slid him another card.

Nattawat ran a hand through his hair, nerves flaring — then tapped the green felt. Hit.

The outcome became painfully clear. He lowered his hands to the table.

Norawit looked at him, then at his own cards, resting his chin on his palm. He needed just a little more to win. The risk was terrifying — and probably stupid. But luck favored the bold. And he was playing with Night’s money.

He asked for a card.

The dealer placed it down.

Night received a seven of hearts. The cycle repeated. The dealer drew. Curtis stood. Nattawat stood. Norawit hit again. Night closed the round.

No more cards.

The dealer revealed his hand.

Thirteen.

The house lost.

“Reveal?” Curtis asked, receiving nods.
“Sixteen,” he said, flipping his cards.

“Close — but you could’ve done better, loser,” Nattawat smirked. “Eighteen.”

“Not bad,” Curtis whistled.

“For fuck’s sake,” Night groaned, flipping his cards. “Bust.”

“Norawit?” Nattawat prompted.

“Looks like you’re all unlucky,” Norawit said smugly, laying his cards down. “Twenty.”

“No way,” Curtis laughed loudly. “You wiped us out?”

“Beginner’s luck,” Curtis winked. “Great play.”

The dealer pushed the chips toward Norawit and began preparing the next round.

As the cards were dealt again, Nattawat and Curtis counted tensely. When Norawit looked at his hand, his breath caught.

A king.
An ace.

Blackjack.

His heart slammed in his chest, heat rushing through his veins. So this is what Nattawat feels when he wins. That intoxicating, barely containable thrill — the pure, heady certainty of victory.

“I’ve got bad news for you,” Norawit said, laying his cards face up. “I won.”

“Holy shit,” Nattawat stared. “You hit blackjack? How? No one even explained combinations.”

“A beginner, huh?” Curtis chuckled. “Looks like we’re all cheats here.”

They played for about an hour. Norawit quit while he was ahead, pocketing a little over ten thousand. Losing it now would’ve been terrifying — the stakes were rising exponentially.

He watched Nattawat closely. The focused gaze. The furrowed brows. The nervous bite of his lips. But most of all — his eyes. God, they shone. Bright with joy, with victory — but not clouded by addiction. He was simply enjoying himself, comfortable, controlled. Everything was going according to plan.

Eventually, Night bowed out, losses stacking after a few big wins.

Now it was just the two old acquaintances — teacher and student.

Curtis watched Nattawat with the pride of a father. His smile was soft, his eyes kind. It put Norawit at ease. Maybe foolishly, but he watched everyone around Nattawat carefully — always searching for villains, for those who might hurt him. He wanted Nattawat surrounded only by people who truly deserved him.

The game grew more intense. Nattawat kept winning, swelling their shared pot with every round. Soon they'd leave — winning too much in one night was impossible. This wasn't two and a half million. Not even half of that. But it was something. Enough to give Lim part of what he was owed. Enough to move them, even slightly, closer to freedom.

Norawit scanned the room.

Most guests were absorbed in play. Then —

A familiar face.

One of Damian's guards.

Coincidence? Maybe.

Then another.

Fear bloomed fast and sharp in his chest.

He looked around frantically. Nattawat noticed immediately.

"You okay, handsome?" he whispered, touching Norawit's knee. Norawit flinched.
"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. I'm going to the restroom."

"You sure?"

"I'll be right back."

He needed to understand why Lim's people were here. If this wasn't a coincidence, they needed to get out — now.

Norawit straightened and headed toward the restroom, eyes scanning faces. Too many strangers. Damian himself wasn't visible — which only made it worse.

He checked his phone. No missed calls.

Still, something felt wrong.

A dull thud echoed down the corridor.

The restroom door was ajar.

Another thud. A muffled male groan.

Norawit slipped closer.

Inside, reflected in the mirrors above the sinks, he saw Damian pinned against the wall — a man gripping his jacket with violent force.

Damian looked calm.

Dangerously so.

Faces unseen. Tension unmistakable.

“Don’t disappoint me,” the man snarled. “We’ve always understood each other.”

“What’s your problem?” Damian snapped, shoving him off.

“You’re stalling.”

“I’m working. Carefully. You want us exposed?”

Threats followed. Violence implied.

Damian dodged a blow effortlessly.

“This hall is full of my security,” he said coolly. “If I walk out with even a scratch, they’ll erase everything here. You included.”

Silence.

“You need me alive,” Damian continued. “My mind makes you money.”

He adjusted his hair calmly.

“Leave through the back. You don’t want witnesses.”

“I need this shipment flawless.”

“As always,” Damian replied.

Norawit backed away silently.

Heart pounding.

This was bad. Very bad.

He rushed back to the table, panic tightening his stomach, and grabbed Nattawat's arm, yanking him up.

"We're leaving. Now."

"Hey—"

"Thank you for tonight," Norawit said quickly to Curtis. "But we need to go."

"Let me finish the round—"

"No. Now."

"What happened?" Nattawat frowned.

"Damian's here."

A voice sounded behind them.

"Leaving already, Titicharoenrak?"

Norawit froze.

His heart dropped.

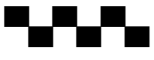
He gripped Nattawat's arm, realization hitting hard, it was too late.

Damian had seen them together.

"Stay," Damian said calmly, taking a seat at the table.
"I'll share a poker game with you."

He smiled slightly.

"Care to take a risk?"



Lorde — Yellow Flicker Beat

HEALTH & The Soft Moon — Colors

Chase Atlantic — EMPTY

Norawit stood frozen for several seconds, his fingers digging into Jirochtikul's elbow hard enough to hurt.

He couldn't take a step forward and leave, his legs felt rooted to the floor. But staying here, beside this man, even for another minute was unbearable. He hated all of it. Hated it so damn much. Nothing about what was happening promised anything good.

Damian Lim was trouble, always had been. So why would he suddenly offer a game of poker to one of his "dogs," as he liked to call people like them?

Norawit could feel it, the piercing stare of icy blue eyes burning into his back, boring holes along his spine like chemical shells. That sickly, poisonous aura of an unhinged killer, someone who measured human lives by their place in the food chain, immediately began to suffocate everything alive around him. His mind betrayed him with sharp, vivid flashes: a gun, shots ringing out, blood, a dead body sprawled across the floor of a trailer park.

Just being in the same room with Damian made it hard to breathe properly.

Damian was acting strange. First, he flaunted his superiority and utter indifference toward everyone around him. Then he called Norawit a "strong specimen" and started offering advice on how to survive in this world. He claimed he constantly forgot North's name, yet addressed Norawit correctly, by name or surname, every single time.

Wasn't that strange?

What kind of game was he playing?

Norawit wanted to understand what went on inside that dangerously sharp mind of his before yet another apocalypse unfolded.

With a heavy, resigned sigh, he realized he had to respond. He loosened his grip on Jirochtikul's elbow and slowly lowered his hand.

"I don't play. Sorry," he said, shifting his gaze to Nattawat, who had been watching him anxiously this entire time.

"I wasn't asking you, Titicharoenrak," Lim smirked, nodding toward the man beside him. "Looks like out of the two of you, he's the only one who plays."

Jirochtikul's eyes widened.

How did he know that?

Had he been watching them? His people? Or had he already dug up everything there was to know about him?

Was this bastard seriously offering him a game of poker, fully aware they were here to win money to pay off a debt?

That was the last thing they needed right now.

Fate had to be mocking them. Out of all possible days, this was the one Damian Lim chose to show up.

Still, they couldn't afford to show weakness. He clearly wasn't used to being refused, and he wouldn't accept a simple no.

Nattawat placed a hand on Norawit's shoulder, gently stroking it, calming him, silently promising that everything would be okay. Then he slowly lifted his gaze, hostility sharpening his eyes as he looked at the man who had brought so much misery to the Titicharoenrak family.

This was exactly how he'd imagined Damian Lim: arrogant, unshakable, and frighteningly cruel.

It was their first meeting, yet Damian's face felt oddly familiar. Maybe they'd crossed paths before, in places like this.

Damian Lim always provoked strong emotions in people. Mostly fear. Mostly hatred.

As for Nattawat, he wanted to strangle him with his bare hands.

For setting North up and exploiting it.

For burning a building full of innocent people.

For killing their pursuer right in front of Norawit and reopening wounds that had never healed.

He was pure evil wrapped in a beautiful shell, and this encounter promised nothing good.

Damian lounged back in his chair, watching them one by one as if patiently waiting for them to step obediently into yet another trap. His icy gaze drilled into them, analyzing every twitch, every breath, like a man permanently stuck on a battlefield.

It felt as though he lived his entire life at war.

With whom, and for what, was unclear.

"How about a short game?" Damian asked, his voice laced with an open challenge as he tilted his head toward Nattawat.

"I don't play poker," Nattawat replied.

“Poker is a game for real men,” Damian sneered. “Men who are confident in themselves. It’s about intelligence, strategy, risk, adrenaline.” He clicked his tongue, lifting his chin arrogantly. “But you look more like a boy. Maybe you’d be more comfortable in the slot machine hall? No thinking required, just press a button and pray.”

“Don’t provoke him. He doesn’t play,” Night said, meeting Lim’s murderous glare without flinching.

“Don’t,” Norawit whispered urgently to Nattawat, noticing the tension in his jaw. “His guards are armed. We leave, just like we agreed. No improvising.”

“Who the hell does he think he is?” Nattawat muttered, disgust dripping from his voice.

“Not here. Not now, baby,” Norawit pleaded softly, shaking his head.

“Sit,” Lim ordered coldly. “That was for you, Titicharoenrak. Now.”

“We were just leaving, so—”

“Are you deaf? I said sit. That’s an order.”

Norawit looked at Nattawat for a few seconds, silently begging him not to act on emotion. Then he turned back.

They returned to the table, knowing they had no real choice.

Nattawat took his seat again. Norawit stayed standing close beside him, unwilling to put even an inch of distance between them. His paranoia flared, if he left Nattawat alone, something would definitely happen.

He noticed how quickly Night grasped what was going on, understanding dawned in his eyes as puzzle pieces snapped together. Now he knew exactly who North owed that massive sum to. And who had set him up.

He didn’t know Damian personally, but he’d heard enough, and none of it was good. Damian occasionally visited his club: private VIP reservations, top-shelf alcohol, lavish tips. Then he’d leave, always accompanied by people just as shady as himself.

Curtis darted confused glances between Lim and the older Jirochtikul, frowning as he processed the tension. He sensed Norawit’s problem with Damian but didn’t fully understand it.

As for Norawit, he wanted nothing more than to leap across the table and smash that smug face in with his boot.

But he couldn’t. Not with innocent people here. Dragging them into an open conflict would be dangerous.

No matter how hard it was, he had to hold himself back.

Damian studied the younger Jirochtikul with a curious squint, then shifted his gaze to his brother. He compared them for a moment, and suddenly smirked.

“So you’re twins.”

“And what if we are?” Jirochtikul replied coolly, ready to tear Lim’s throat out for his brother.

“No problem,” Damian shrugged. “Just surprised.” His gaze locked onto Nattawat. “So, which are you, Mr. Jirochtikul? A man… or a boy? Care to take a risk?”

“For what?” Nattawat asked.

“Money,” Damian replied casually, glancing at Norawit. “That’s why you’re all here.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Night said sharply. “We had an agreement.”

“I’ll play with you, Damian,” Keeland interjected with a strained smile. “The kids were about to leave. I’m just getting started.”

“Perfect,” Lim grinned. “If there are no worthy opponents left, we’ll split the game.”

“I’ll play,” Nattawat said suddenly.

Silence fell over the table.

Everyone except Damian exchanged tense looks. They all knew what this meant. One wrong move, and it could cost him his head.

“What?” Norawit whispered, stunned. “No. Don’t do this.”

“You won’t,” Night said darkly.

“Mmm,” Damian hummed, amused. “Now I get it. You need your big brother’s permission?”

“It’s fine,” Nattawat said, covering the hand gripping his shoulder and staring Lim down. “Relax. One game.”

“But—”

“I’m okay,” he repeated, meeting Norawit’s eyes. “Trust me.”

There was certainty in his gaze. And something else Norawit couldn’t quite name: pride, resolve, maybe defiance.

With a heavy sigh, Norawit bit his lip and gave in once again.

Because somehow… he believed him.

The dealer takes out a fresh deck of cards, cracks the seal, and begins to shuffle—slowly, elegantly, with a flair that looks almost theatrical, like a professional magician showing off.

The first stage before the game is about to begin, known among professionals as the pre-flop.

The game starts with the forced blind bets, simply put, the blinds, and Keeland is the first to act, seated to the left of the dealer's hand.

Nattawat knows every rule and every nuance of this game by heart. Over the years, he's taken the pot hundreds of times, and lost just as often, bleeding himself dry. Being broke isn't unfamiliar territory for him. He could make half a million in a single night, then plunge straight into debt, losing even what didn't belong to him. Poker has always been his weakness.

Sometimes, during a game, the thrill would swallow him whole. He'd stop caring entirely, slipping an expensive watch off his wrist and betting it, then the keys to a car he'd won in a race, and then whatever else he had left, until there was nothing. Empty. So empty he wouldn't know what he'd eat the next day.

Lately, though, the addiction hasn't been as sharp, because he has something that distracts him well enough from the urge to play. Norawit.

Before Norawit entered his life, Nattawat still gave in from time to time, but never for money. Norawit knew how to captivate him, how to give him vivid, intoxicating emotions that were more than enough to make him feel alive.

Nattawat doesn't yet know how tonight's game will end, but the monstrous anxiety is already curling in his chest. He's risking too much. First, everything they've managed to win tonight, and it's no small sum. Second, he's walking a razor's edge, because this game could completely destroy his brakes.

But right now, he's decided not to play for money. And if everything goes smoothly, Damian Lim will remember this night forever.

Nattawat watches Curtis place his bet, studying him with unease, then slides his own chips forward. Lim drills him with a sharp, predatory stare before placing the big blind. His amount is three times higher than what the casino owner himself put down.

Once the blinds are set, the dealer begins the first deal, placing two cards face down in front of each player.

This is where the real anxiety hits. Palms grow damp. The heartbeat accelerates, feels like two hundred beats per minute.

The game has begun.

Now everyone looks at their cards, evaluating their next move. This is the most crucial moment, no emotion can leak. No obvious joy. No visible disappointment. The perfect option is complete indifference.

Luckily, Nattawat has mastered that.

He exhales deeply and silently, pulling on his poker face like a mask. He feels familiar hands resting on his shoulders, and, if he's honest, it calms him, gives him strength. He knows Norawit is worried right now, but not about the outcome of the game. He's worried about him, about what Nattawat is feeling. Winning or losing doesn't matter to him. Nattawat's comfort does.

Norawit gently rubs his shoulders with his thumbs, letting out a tense breath when Nattawat lifts his cards. Nattawat can almost hear his breathing, the heavy thud of his heart.

Two low cards of the same suit, not bad for a start. Something to hope for, if luck keeps moving in the same direction. Nattawat studies Keeland's reaction. He only twitches his nose slightly and folds his cards onto the table. He raises the bet, pushing his chips toward the dealer.

Looks like he has decent chances too.

But reading the situation through his emotions would be like pointing at the sky and guessing. He's a professional bluffer, better than anyone in this casino.

"Raise," Curtis says with a smile. "Baby Natt?"

Nattawat nods briefly, adding a few chips, drawing in a slow breath. The tension thickens with every second. The air in the poker room suddenly feels heavy, molten, like lead. Each short breath burns his lungs.

Everyone is tense, except Damian.

Norawit is losing his mind, nearly chewing his lips raw until tiny streaks of blood appear. Night taps his fingers nervously against his thigh, glancing at him again and again, silently asking how his brother is holding up.

Titicharoenrak doesn't understand the game at all, but he hopes the outcome will be favorable. Though he isn't even sure what favorable means anymore. If his boyfriend wins, they'll take the money, but that might bruise Lim's ego, and his ego is planet-sized. Still, he doesn't seem like the type to hold a grudge over a poker game.

The money doesn't matter anymore.

All Norawit can think about is Nattawat. Only him, and what he's feeling. The most important thing is that this game doesn't trigger another relapse. If it does, they'll have much bigger problems.

"Call," Nattawat finally says, matching the bet.

"Well, looks like everyone's happy with their cards," Lim sneers, stopping the waitress with the silver tray. "Bombay Sapphire with lime, please."

She nods politely and walks away. The self-absorbed bastard tosses his chips onto the table and smirks.

“Raise.”

The first betting round ends, and the dealer opens the flop.

Three community cards are placed face up on the table. Now the main board is visible, and everyone begins calculating their next move, mentally weaving these cards into potential combinations, already sensing which direction the game must go.

There’s no single right way to play poker, but there are strategies that increase your odds. Nattawat evaluates his hand, breathing evenly, betraying nothing. It’s hard, because of the game, and because of who he’s playing against, but he’s doing it brilliantly. Every effort is invisible, and worth it.

The small blind opens the betting—Keeland. He can either check or raise. He and Nattawat exchange glances, both realizing the pot is swelling thanks to Damian, which plays perfectly into their hands.

Lim is clearly used to high-stakes games, but he’s no professional. That’s obvious. He’s just entertaining himself, throwing around money he’s used to swimming in. It means nothing to him.

How far is he willing to go just to prove he’s better than everyone, even in something as trivial as this?

The bets rise again.

For Nattawat, the stake isn’t just a massive sum anymore, it’s the chance to metaphorically smash the smug grin off the face of the piece of shit sitting across from him. And that feels far better than winning a big pot.

You can’t read anyone’s hand from their faces. Keeland and Lim are good at controlling themselves, but Nattawat is no weaker. And strategy is his strength.

Night and Norawit exchange glances, nerves stretched to the breaking point, silently praying for a good outcome. The tension at the table is blistering, unbearable. They’re almost convinced the night will end with bullets in their foreheads.

Norawit’s gaze drifts to Lim, and he notices a subtle wince as the man shifts in his chair. Pain? Did someone actually hit him earlier? Maybe when he mentioned trouble, he wasn’t talking about the stolen device at all, because those guys were dealt with brutally.

Maybe Damian Lim isn’t as untouchable as he seems. Maybe there’s someone out there who can stand on equal footing with him. A business partner in something far dirtier.

Either way, it’s none of their concern. They just need to get away from him.

After the betting on the flop ends, the dealer places the fourth card—the turn. No one is backing down. If anything, they’re accelerating.

Nattawat bets nearly everything he has, less than half remains. If Lim has a strong hand, this will be a devastating mistake. But Nattawat pushes forward anyway.

The adrenaline hits like a drug. His body ignites. His brain starts working at one hundred and fifty percent. The world sharpens—colors brighter, sounds louder, sensations razor-edged.

And that's a terrible sign.

His leg bounces under the table as he watches his opponents closely. Curtis doesn't matter, this is about Damian. His friend will understand the strategy and join him against Lim. But this bastard? He's not giving him the win easily.

Nattawat studies his cards, then the board. He knows exactly where this is going. He'll have to gamble big. Luck isn't on his side tonight, but surrender never has been. Just like taking a dangerous turn at full speed, he'll brake only when he decides.

He's holding the sixth strongest possible hand in poker. At best, a damn straight. Not great. But if he's meant to lose tonight, he'll do it beautifully.

Curtis taught him that players who can accurately predict the range of their opponents' hands can determine whether the board helped them or not. Those predictions allow you to bluff, or win with a weaker hand.

He has a chance. Only if Lim's hand is weak.

But judging by Lim's unconscious body language, he's doing just fine. Which means forcing him to fold is the only way to win.

The waitress brings Damian his drink. He winks at her playfully.

And in that brief moment, while Lim is distracted, Norawit sees Keeland almost imperceptibly discard a card and replace it with another, slipping it from his sleeve.

What the hell? He's cheating.

Norawit tightens his grip on Nattawat's shoulders, glancing around, but of course, security doesn't react. It's Curtis' casino. He can do whatever he wants here.

Lim returns to the game, either unaware he's been cheated, or pretending not to notice. Nattawat doesn't react either. He likely knows. Every trick Curtis pulls is familiar to him.

He said he hasn't played in years, but is this how he scams his wealthy clients?

Unfair. But irrelevant.

Norawit gives Nattawat every ounce of support he can, emotionally and physically, never once removing his hands, standing behind him like a guardian angel.

He doesn't like the way Lim looks at them. Sometimes his gaze lingers on Norawit's hands, as if trying to decipher the nature of their relationship. Maybe he suspects this is the man who

helped Nattawat on his first assignment. Or maybe he's just trying to understand what binds them, and how strong that bond is.

Lim stares at Nattawat too intently, too piercingly, like he's searching for something. His icy gaze leaves behind an unpleasant chill. As if he's looking for answers in someone else's eyes.

But Nattawat doesn't flinch.

No matter how badly this ends.

The penultimate betting round begins, the moment when the final pot becomes clear, the last chance for anyone to fold before the showdown. Curtis holds his bet.

Nattawat pauses for several tense seconds.

This is it. His only chance to carry out a small act of revenge.

If not now, he'll lose in the next round without even landing a slap on that bastard's face.

"How much do we have in the pot?" he asks, tapping the cards against the table.

"Two hundred and ninety-five thousand," the dealer replies.

"Hm." Jirochtikul hums in satisfaction, pushing his chips forward. "In that case… I'm all in."

"What the hell are you doing?" Titicharoenrak whispers sharply, frowning. "That's everything you won tonight."

"I know."

"Feeling brave?" Lim asks, arching a brow with open disdain.

"We're almost at the finish line. I want to squeeze everything I can out of this situation. I don't get to play poker for money very often."

"And you're so sure you'll win?" he scoffs, taking a sip of alcohol.

"We'll see. Until the cards are on the table, any of us could be the winner."

"So you're gambling blind."

"Aren't you?" Nattawat laughs slyly. "I'm gambling based on skill."

"And what does that skill tell you?"

"That deep down, you're a coward."

"That sounds like a challenge," Damian says, running a hand through his hair.

"Then take the risk with me. If you're going to play, play properly. You've got something to go all in with too, don't you?"

“And you?” the man asks, drilling him with a hard stare.

Nattawat smirks and cockily lifts a brow. He glances around, rolls his neck until it cracks, then locks his dark eyes back onto Lim, deciding to go all the way.

“I’m guessing you’re building a full house. Or maybe a flush. Not bad odds, definitely strong. But don’t get cocky. Keeland’s clearly nervous, yet he hasn’t folded. I’m playing aggressively, raising the stakes. So now you’re wondering—who’s bluffing?” Jirochtikul clicks his tongue. “Him? A professional poker player, a well-known cheat? Or me, the guy you’ve never seen before, who you assume isn’t smart or brave enough for poker?”

He leans back slightly.

“I’m not as simple as you think. Tough choice, isn’t it? You’re not a gambler like me, you’re an amateur. You make decisions based on what you can see. You don’t know all the strategies, the nuances that let you build the right theories. And that,” he adds calmly, “is the biggest mistake you can make when playing against professionals.”

His head tilts, just slightly.

“So which one of the three of us wins? I suggest you bow out gracefully now, admit defeat against poker masters, rather than be crushed with humiliation on the next street and lose twice as much. At least that would be dignified. Because my plan is to take everything you put on the table.”

Lim stares at him for a long moment, eyes burning. Nattawat doesn’t look away. A brutal, silent duel unfolds between them. If looks could lash skin, they’d be dead already. Brown eyes clash with cold blue, neither blinking, both desperate to win.

Inside, Nattawat’s stomach twists with adrenaline and fear, but not a single muscle betrays it. This isn’t the moment to back down. He has to break him. He needs that decision. Even if only emotionally.

“Fold,” Damian finally says, placing his cards on the table, his gaze never leaving Nattawat.

Nattawat grins, satisfaction blooming in his chest. This is it. The moment he started all of this for. Payback for the attempted humiliation. He forced him to fold, even though Nattawat himself was likely holding a losing hand.

The dealer lays down the river card. The final round begins.

Only two players remain: Nattawat and Curtis.

It’s time to reveal their hands.

The winner takes the entire pot, nearly three hundred thousand. Not bad at all.

Keeland reveals his cards first, barely suppressing a smirk. Two pairs. Trash.

Norawit frowns in confusion. He doesn't understand, how could that be, if he'd been playing dirty? What does this even mean?

"You were right," Nattawat says quietly, taking a deep breath as he looks at Curtis, then turns his gaze to Lim and flips his cards. "I may be a boy, but they call me Lucky Thirteen. Straight. You lost, even though you were probably holding high cards."

"Fuck," Damian whispers, squeezing his eyes shut.

He drags his hands down his face, blinks rapidly, and then laughs, loud and clear. He understands everything now.

"No way," Night murmurs, covering his mouth.

"You were bluffing. Not him. You played me perfectly. I was almost convinced you had a royal hand. You were so confident, damn you. Brilliant. You made me doubt my own victory, when I had a flush." He laughs again, shaking his head. "Incredible."

"This is a game for real men," Nattawat replies evenly, echoing his earlier words. "Confidence. Strategy. Risk. Poker is all of that." He shrugs innocently.

"I underestimated you," Lim says, standing up. "Badly."

"Don't worry, sometimes the cards just aren't on your side. You picked the wrong opponent. Maybe try slot machines instead? You might be a genius inventor, but poker isn't just brains. It's cunning. Experience. You'll never beat sharks."

"If you're skating on thin ice, skate fast," Damian says thoughtfully. "If you risk it, go all in. My father always says only a real man can risk everything while having nothing." He hums approvingly. "That was beautiful. Your name?"

"Nattawat," he answers, meeting his gaze.

"Thanks for the game, Nattawat." Lim smiles, lingers a second too long, then turns and leaves.

About ten people rise immediately and follow him out of the poker room. Everyone else exhales in relief, like they'd been holding their breath the entire time.

"You're insane," Night snaps, glaring at his brother. "That was dangerous. He could've reacted very differently. Is your life worth nothing to you?"

"It worked. Calm down. We won."

"I'll calm down," the younger scoffs. "Sure. But do you even know who he is?"

"I do. And now he knows not everyone is willing to bow and lick his boots."

"And you didn't think about the consequences for Norawit or North?" Night snaps, pointing at Titicharoenrak. "One word from that man, and your boyfriend's brother goes to prison."

“You told him?” Nattawat asks Norawit, who nods shortly.

“So what now?” Night presses, leaning forward. “Wait until he puts you in debt? Or hangs you himself? Do you even realize what you just did?”

“If he wanted revenge, he’d have done it already,” Nattawat replies calmly. “Not walked away smiling.”

“You don’t know him at all. Lim is the kind who dismantles his prey slowly, pulls out every bone before swallowing.”

“You’re talking like I’ve already been sentenced to death.”

“Pray I’m wrong,” Night mutters. “Otherwise, you’re next. As always, your recklessness is perfectly timed.”

“Stop acting like a mother hen. I’m not five. Why are you so worked up?”

“Because I care about you, Nattawat. We already have enough problems with North, and now you decide to put yourself in danger?” He stands abruptly, drawing attention. “I know you like risking your ass, but sometimes remember there are people who actually worry about you.”

Night watches him for a while, then looks apologetically at Titicharoenrak before heading out of the casino.

Nattawat exhales heavily. He understands why his brother is angry. He’s scared. Just like Norawit is scared for North.

Maybe it was a mistake, but he couldn’t do otherwise. Let that bastard learn that losing exists. They’re already drowning. How much worse could it get?

“What the hell was that?” Titicharoenrak finally asks after a long silence.

“Poker,” Nattawat answers, rubbing his face. “Good poker.”

“And you?” Norawit nods toward Curtis. “What were you doing? I saw you switch cards. That’s cheating, and why? You had the worst hand.”

“You don’t get it,” Nattawat shakes his head. “And that’s exactly why he’s a professional.”

“For example?”

“He threw the game so I’d win.”

“But… why?” Titicharoenrak whispers. “You could’ve won yourself.”

“I could have. But that was Little Natt’s game. And I won’t let anyone call a child I raised like my own son stupid or cowardly, not even a spoiled bastard like Damian Lim.” Keeland smiles faintly. “It’ll be a good life lesson for him.”

After a brief but unpleasant clash with his brother, and half an hour of aimless driving through the city, Night pulls up in front of a three-story apartment building in the Sotel district. If he's honest, he doesn't quite understand why he's here. He didn't plan it, his hands just turned the wheel, and somehow the road led him here on its own.

He parks a short distance away, beneath a broken streetlamp, and studies the shabby building through the windshield. How many years has it been since anyone bothered to repair it? And is it even safe to live in a place like this? It looks like it could collapse at any moment. In some places the outer walls are cracked so badly they seem to be crumbling right before his eyes, and the old windows look as though they're barely holding on, barely breathing.

He's never lived anywhere like this. He has no idea what it feels like to come home every evening to a place like this after a long day of work. It must feel awful. But people live like this because they have no other choice, because they can't afford anything better.

All his life, Night lived in a luxurious mansion. He had the best toys, the best clothes, everything money could buy, except warmth. Except love. Parental love, in particular. Though, to be fair, his father did give him attention, just in a twisted, warped form. He beat him. Often. For no real reason at all. Just because there was no one else to take his anger out on.

That was the other side of a life of wealth and privilege: pain. Senseless, monstrous pain. It left scars, not only deep inside his chest, but on his body as well, in places he rarely let himself look at.

The older he grew, the less afraid he became of his father, but the more he accepted it as something normal. As if this was how things were in every family. As if this was just the way of the world. He believed that until the day he learned it wasn't true.

He saw it in the family of his close friend. No one ever raised a hand there. No one even raised their voice. There was trust, tenderness, and quiet affection between parents and child. It felt alien to him—strange, almost unreal.

And oddly enough, the person who finally pushed him to stand up to his father was his brother, someone Night barely knew at the time. They hadn't really known each other growing up. Not until they were around fifteen, old enough to understand things.

Nattawat had been fragile back then. Wild, frightened, like an animal beaten down by life, one that had never known care or safety. But beneath that fragile exterior was a strength of

spirit Night had never seen before.

The day their father tried to hit Nattawat, right in front of him, something snapped. Night stepped between them and hit their father back. Just like that. He punched him in the face with all his strength. The man who had spent years beating a helpless child.

That was the moment Night understood that enduring violence wasn't normal. That it wasn't something you were supposed to accept.

Later, Nattawat admitted that violence had been a constant in his own life too. He'd learned to defend himself from his mother's lovers. In the end, his brother became the catalyst that gave him the strength to fight back.

And yet, no matter how many steps Night took toward him afterward, trying to build some kind of relationship, nothing ever worked. His older brother always kept him at arm's length.

Suddenly, a black-and-silver motorcycle appears, rolling slowly up to the building's entrance before stopping. The headlight goes dark. The rider pulls off his helmet and runs a hand through his hair.

A large male figure in a leather jacket swings off the bike, and Night recognizes him instantly. Broad shoulders. Arms shaped by countless fights. Long legs, a tempting ass, black hair sticking out in every direction, a shaved eyebrow, just like his brother's. Wild eyes. Incredibly full lips, reminiscent of Norawit's.

Night exhales deeply, staring, resting his chin on his crossed hands atop the steering wheel of his Martin.

What the hell is he even doing here? Why did he come? What does he want from him?

He doesn't know.

North is a bad guy. A very bad guy with way too many problems. A drug addict. The same troublemaker who trashed the bar in Night's club. He's prone to uncontrolled aggression and violence, exactly the kind of person Night has spent his whole life avoiding, because he himself was once his father's punching bag.

And yet, for some reason, he wanted to see him.

It wasn't pity. It was more like an urge to reach out and pull him out of the mess he was drowning in.

It all started with that smile.

That cursed smile he'd never seen before. Titicharoenrak was usually gloomy, unfriendly, closed off, but that night, at the street races, his smile had been genuinely happy. And Night wanted to see it again, even though men like him were completely not his type.

He notices a car suddenly speeding up from the other side of the building and screeching to a stop, tires screaming. This doesn't look good.

North freezes at the steps, then slowly backs toward the wall, like something has frightened him. Three men step out of the car and immediately start shouting at him aggressively. It's obvious, they're someone's hired muscle. It's not hard to guess whose.

Everything takes a turn for the worse when one of them pulls out a gun and presses it to North's forehead.

Titicharoenrak squeezes his eyes shut and goes completely still, as if the simple act has paralyzed him. He looks like he isn't even breathing. Like the sight of a gun sends him into a dissociative trance.

That's serious. Too serious. Night isn't about to let them kill him.

He starts the engine and slams the gas, drawing their attention. The man with the gun lowers it instantly, hiding it behind his back, and takes a step away. Shielding his eyes from the headlights, he lets North go.

The Martin rolls up fast. Night lowers the window.

"Hey," he calls casually, flashing a charming smile. "Got a problem here?"

"Get lost, buddy," a bald guy snaps.

"And if I don't?" Night arches a brow. "You gonna shoot me too?"

"This doesn't concern you. Walk away while you still can. Forget what you saw."

"Hm," Night hums thoughtfully, nodding as he reaches into the glove compartment. "Say that again."

He pulls out a gun and aims it at them.

Titicharoenrak's eyes widen, and he swallows hard.

"Hey, man, relax," another guy says, raising his hands. "We were just talking."

"Step away from him," Night says coldly. "Do you know who I am?" He tilts his head. "Night Jirochtikul. Unpleasant to meet you."

"Jirochtikul?" the bald man echoes, exchanging looks with the others.

"Yeah. That Jirochtikul. The judge's son."

He clicks the safety off.

"One step away from him. Now."

Without warning, Night fires a shot into the ground at their feet. They jump back instantly.

"North," Night says firmly, keeping the gun trained on them. "Get in the car. Please."

“What, suddenly too scared to shoot me?” he continues coolly. “You know what’d happen if you did. Wouldn’t want to risk making my father angry. He still needs me, after all.”

“We were just supposed to deliver a message,” the man with the gun mutters.

“With a gun to his head?” Night snaps. “Say your piece and get out.”

He nods slightly toward the car, urging North on. Titicharoenrak moves hesitantly, then slips into the passenger seat.

“You’re working for Lim, right?” Night asks. “What does he want?”

“He has to fight tonight.”

“He’ll fight when he’s fit to,” Night replies sharply. “If he goes in injured, he’ll lose. Is that what Damian wants? I doubt it. Tell your boss he’s not the only one who knows how to threaten people. North’s paying his debt as best he can. He’ll send part of the money soon. Until then, back off.”

After a moment, the man nods and signals his crew to leave.

Only once they’re gone does Night put the gun away.

He turns slowly toward his passenger.

North sits slumped, staring ahead, hollow-eyed. Those damn fights never leave him untouched. Pressure from Damian. Pressure on Lim from wealthy clients. A vicious circle, and the one suffering most is the man sitting beside him now.

Old wounds barely heal before new ones appear.

Night studies his tense face, struck by a wild urge to smooth the deep crease between his brows. He looks like a feral creature, one that would never let itself be held. Someone who needs careful handling, something only one person in the world seems capable of.

His brother.

“Don’t you want to say anything?” Night asks quietly.

“What the hell are you doing here, idiot?” North snaps.

“That’s not what I was hoping for.”

“You expecting gratitude?” North scoffs.

“I mean… yeah. I kind of saved you.”

“I didn’t ask you to. You shouldn’t have been here at all.”

“My brother pissed me off,” Night shrugs. “Went for a drive.”

“You seriously drove here from Beverly Hills in that car, flashing your Rolex, because your brother annoyed you?”

“Don’t ask,” Night smirks. “I don’t get it either.”

“You’ve either got no survival instinct, or you’re a complete moron.”

“Probably the second one.”

“Well, admitting it is a start,” North snorts. “But you could’ve just said you wanted to see me.”

“Egotism really runs in your family,” Night chuckles softly.

North smiles faintly despite himself, eyeing Night’s flawless suit, black shirt, perfect hair. A prince from a fairy tale with a happy ending, definitely not meant for someone like him.

“You look good,” North mutters. “It suits you. And I don’t know why I said that. Forget it.”

“Wow,” Night grins. “You can give compliments. At this rate you might even learn how to say thank you.”

“Fuck off.”

“Right back at you.”

They stare at each other, then both smile and look away. Night’s palms are sweaty. Whatever this is, it scares him. But he can’t walk away.

“Is this okay for a date?” he asks softly, smoothing his jacket.

“What?”

“My outfit. Date-appropriate?”

“Depends on the date. And who it’s with.”

“With you.”

“You asking me out?”

“No,” Night sighs, smirking. “I’m informing you. You said you wouldn’t resist.”

After a moment, that same beautiful smile curves North’s lips, the one Night’s been chasing.

“Fine,” North says. “You get one chance not to screw it up.”

All this time, Damian had been watching them from his car. He’d parked in the shadows several dozen meters from the house, and as he watched Night drive away with one of his dogs, a rough chuckle slipped from his throat. What the hell was wrong with these brothers?

One kept sticking his nose where it didn't belong, while the other had the nerve to flick him on the nose and play poker with him at the same table. They were both completely reckless.

In this whole mess, the only real winner was North Titicharoenrak. The number of people protecting him was astonishing. With each passing day, his defenses only grew stronger, and none of them showed any intention of backing down. Damian wondered what it must feel like to have friends that loyal.

"Mr. Lim?" a quiet voice came from the passenger seat. "Is everything alright? Can we begin?"

Damian slowly turned his head toward the man beside him and let out a deep breath. Night's car had disappeared barely twenty seconds ago, yet he'd sunk so deeply into thought that he'd forgotten he wasn't alone. His informant was supposed to bring him something interesting tonight. For several days, the man had been meticulously gathering information on Norawit Titicharoenrak'sinner circle. Some people claimed that a certain intriguing brunette was almost always hovering nearby. The same one who had been with him at the casino again tonight.

"Did you get it?" Damian asked.

"Of course. It wasn't difficult," the man replied, handing him a thin folder. "A complete dossier on Mr. Nattawat Jirochtikul. I think you'll find the contents quite surprising."

"You've got my attention, Mick. Good work. You're fast. I should probably raise your pay."

Lim skimmed through the basic information, then picked up several photographs taken by his private detective. Even those had been prepared in advance. Excellent work. Mick knew better than anyone that if you didn't give a hundred percent, you'd be thrown out of the inner circle without a second thought.

In most of the photos, the young man with striking looks was alone. The surveillance had been focused on him specifically. A couple of shots were taken near the tattoo studio where he worked, others on city streets. There were photos from a gym and a few with friends. A blue-haired girl and a guy appeared frequently near him, along with one very familiar face.

And there it was. His loyal dog.

Damian shifted several photos showing Nattawat with Norawit Titicharoenrak and studied them carefully. So the rumors hadn't been lies. He'd seen it with his own eyes at the casino. Their relationship clearly went beyond friendship, which explained why his debtor had been so desperate not to drag other people into this. He'd resisted, protecting those close to him.

Still, their personal life didn't interest Damian much.

His gaze landed on a photo of the surveillance target standing beside a Mustang, and his eyebrow rose in surprise. Not bad at all. Either the kid had excellent taste, or he genuinely knew his cars. And apparently, he was the very assistant Damian had been hearing about.

“So he races?” Damian said, returning to the dossier. “That’s a powerful toy.”

“Yes. A street racer with an impeccable record. A winner. A few years ago, he took first place in Osaka.”

“Really?” Lim shot him a quick look.

“Lately, he mostly races on a city track called the Loop. He’s something of a celebrity there. I went myself to verify the information. He’s genuinely good at what he does.”

“I’ve heard of that place. A lot of hidden talent comes out of there. No wonder someone with an Osaka-level reputation became a local star. He’s an interesting character.”

“Terrible temperament,” Mick added. “I asked around. Impulsive, rude, arrogant. Sharp tongue, endless attitude.”

“Of course,” Damian replied calmly. “I already know that. And these two?” He nodded toward the photos of the brightly colored friends.

“His best friends. Pahn Pathitta and Satang Kittiphop. The girl is wild and unpredictable, capable of just about anything. She likes participating in races, but I didn’t dig deeper. The guy’s calmer. I’ve never seen him behind the wheel, but he works at the same tattoo studio as Mr. Jirochtikul.”

“Dangerous?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good. What about his brother?”

“Night Jirochtikul,” Mick said, flipping the page. “Quite the profile. Owner of the Invictus club. Lives in Beverly Hills. Not obscenely wealthy, but very well-off. Smart, balanced. Not as troublesome as Nattawat, but a tough nut to crack. He seems harmless, but I wouldn’t trust that impression. We just saw proof that he’s someone to be wary of. A self-made man, which says a lot about his strength of character.”

“And they’re definitely Nut Jirochtikul’s sons,” Lim said, frowning. “That’s confirmed?”

“Yes. He had DNA tests done on both boys when they were children.”

“Strange that I didn’t know this earlier. I always thought I knew almost everything about everyone.”

“Judge Jirochtikul doesn’t like sharing details of his personal life,” Mick replied. “Especially after the scandalous divorce and the revelation of his illegitimate children. That’s when the public found out, even though it wasn’t his plan. Now, though, it works in his favor. He uses the children as a shield and a distraction when necessary. When it suits him, he plays the role of a loving father to maintain the image of an exemplary citizen. You know how important a spotless reputation is for someone who claims to represent justice and integrity in this city.”

“Yeah,” Damian drawled. “I’ve dealt with him before. A corrupt bastard. Anything interesting on the target?”

“He’s dangerous. In his youth, he survived on petty crime and theft, trying to make ends meet. That earned him trouble and a suspended sentence. He grew up in poor conditions. Alcoholic mother, chaotic lifestyle. I also found out that Curtis Keeland lived with him when he was nine.”

“That old card shark should’ve mentioned he raised a real shark,” Damian muttered. “Must’ve taught him everything.”

“I think so. After several run-ins with the police, he seems to have straightened out. At least, there are no serious legal issues now.”

“Interesting,” Lim scoffed softly. “So Mr. Nattawat Jirochtikul is a ticking time bomb. You never know when he’ll explode.”

“Exactly. He’s someone to handle carefully.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. What about his relationship with Titicharoenrak?” Damian asked.

“Romantic, as far as I can tell,” the detective replied, flipping another page.

“That much was obvious. They’re far too transparent. I’m more interested in his family. Do we know anything more about his childhood?”

“I found out that Night lived with their father until he was eighteen, but Nattawat moved around a lot. What’s interesting is that before his mother’s death, he lived in Savannah.”

“Savannah? Georgia?” Damian clarified.

Mick nodded, pointing to the line in the file.

“His grandmother lived there.”

“Too many coincidences. I need more information on his mother. What was her name?”

“That’s the key detail you’re looking for,” Mick said, turning a few more pages.

Lim studied the photograph of a dark-haired woman in the corner of the page and recognized her instantly. Terribly thin, yet beautiful. Delicate nose, full lips, large eyes. Years of alcohol and antidepressants had left deep shadows beneath them, draining the brightness from her irises.

He skimmed the text, his frown deepening. His instincts hadn’t failed him tonight. There was a reason he’d watched the young man so closely. His mannerisms, behavior, speech, even his smile. He’d inherited it all from her. The suspicion had formed the moment Damian first saw him, and now he had proof in his hands. Nattawat resembled his mother far more than Night ever had.

“My God,” Damian whispered, fingers tracing the printed letters. “Their mother’s name was Esther.”

“Yes, Mr. Lim,” the detective confirmed.

“She lived in Savannah for a time, then died in an accident. So it’s true.”

“So far, all the facts check out.”

“I can’t believe it,” Damian said, shaking his head. “I never would’ve known if I hadn’t started digging. I’ve been lied to my whole life. Do you think Esther might have discovered something? And that’s why she was killed?”

“It’s possible. I wouldn’t be surprised if you turn out to be right, Mr. Lim.”

“Is there really anything left in this life that could still surprise me?” Damian let out a bitter laugh.

“What will you do with this information?” the detective asked carefully.

“I’ll keep searching for the truth. Carefully. I don’t need anyone knowing I’m digging into this,” Damian said thoughtfully. “I don’t have more answers yet. Just more questions. Keep everything quiet.”

“I can continue investigating. Do you want the whole truth?”

“Yes, Mick. I want to know the real cause of Esther’s death, and what role my mother played in all of this,” Damian said, meeting his gaze.

Chapter 8: VIII

Chapter Notes

Hi 🤍
If you've made it all the way here, thank you. This chapter (and this story as a whole) has taken more out of me than I expected, in the best and scariest ways. I poured a lot of my heart, fear, anger, and tenderness into these pages, and knowing that you're still here means more than I can properly explain.

This story is long, and it's meant to be. I wanted to give the characters space to hurt, grow, make mistakes, and earn every small moment of softness they get. Nothing here is rushed on purpose — the slow burn, the heaviness, the pauses — all of it is part of the journey I wanted to tell.

Thank you for your patience, your comments, your quiet reads, and even just opening this fic and choosing to stay. Whether you've been here since chapter one or you found this later and binged it all at once, I'm really grateful you trusted me with your time and emotions.

There's still more road ahead. I promise it's going somewhere.

Please take care of yourselves, drink water, and be gentle with your hearts 🤍
See you in the next chapter.

dana

Lil Revive, Darko — Last Night I Accepted Death W Open Arms

pierre XO, ian KEL — Let Me Explain

The xx — Together

Polo G — GNF (OKOKOK)

Jay Sean — Incomplete

For so many years, days, hours, and minutes, Norawit had been waiting for this exact moment, replaying it in his mind over and over, imagining how it would unfold.

Again and again, he ran through possible conversations with this man, rehearsed his own actions. More than anything, he wanted to beat him to death like the filthy creature he was.

But that wasn't why he was here. And now, with only the click of the front door lock left to wait for, it felt as though an entire small eternity was stretching out before him.

He had decided to keep digging for the truth about the night his parents were killed, and now he was one small step closer to the answer. He had managed to obtain the address of the man directly responsible for what happened. At this very moment, he was breaking California state law, standing inside someone else's house without the owner's knowledge.

Did that bother him? No. It was necessary.

There was no other way. He couldn't simply show up and have a civilized conversation with that animal. Titicharoenrak knew he would never tell the truth willingly. No one had shown him mercy after his mother and father died, so why should he treat anyone differently? The man he had come for tonight had spent his entire life elbow-deep in other people's blood. He would only understand the language of his own kind. Only those who could stand up for themselves deserved respect.

That was something Damian Lim had once said, and he had been damn right.

Norawit had grown up. Now he was capable of defending himself against people like this.

Thanks to Pahn's hacking skills, they had uncovered a great deal of interesting information about a man named James Torrance. Earl had led them to him, and so far he was the only solid lead in the unsolved case of his parents' deaths. Torrance had been a suspect during the investigation, but later he was quietly removed from it and didn't even remain on the witness list.

Wasn't that strange?

The records of his interrogation were deeply suspicious. He spoke as if reciting a rehearsed script, and experienced detectives had just… accepted it? Something was wrong. Very wrong. And that was exactly what Norawit needed to uncover.

At first, it hadn't been clear how this shady man was connected to that night. But the moment Norawit saw his photograph on the monitor in his best friend's room, everything snapped into place. Blond hair. Green eyes. And the scar on his cheek that Norawit remembered all too well.

He would never forget that bastard's face.

And now, after all these years, they were about to meet again.

When realization hit him, it felt like a blow to the chest. For several seconds, he forgot how to breathe, until Pahn wrapped him in a tight hug and calmed him down. On the screen was the man who had been in their living room that night. The one who had fired the shot into his father's head. The one who had pulled the trigger and watched as others beat a defenseless woman until her final breath.

In truth, he had killed them both. He had been the one in charge of everyone in that room.

And despite all of it, he had walked away clean.

Excellent work by law enforcement, wasn't it? A double homicide that never even reached a real trial due to a "lack of suspects." Where the hell had anyone ever seen something like that?

James's house was surprisingly cozy. There was a woman's touch everywhere. He had once had a family, though it had fallen apart. What hurt most were the photographs on the shelves and the handmade crafts his children had once given him. How did his conscience allow him to build a life as if nothing had happened? As if he had never killed anyone, never destroyed other people's lives.

The inhumanity. The selfishness.

Norawit stood in the corner of the living room, swallowed by darkness, peering out from behind a thick curtain as he watched the street. It was a quiet, respectable neighborhood. The kind with responsible, vigilant neighbors. He needed to be careful and draw no unnecessary attention. He didn't need problems.

After several long minutes, a car finally pulled into the driveway.

There he was.

Norawit watched the homeowner circle the vehicle and retrieve grocery bags from the trunk. Something inside his chest began to boil, like an emotional volcano ready to erupt. It felt as if he might tear apart, his anger spilling out like molten lava. His emotions ignited as if someone had flipped a switch, and horrifying images from the past flooded his vision.

The click of a safety.

His body shook violently, and he closed his eyes for a few seconds, trying to steady himself. It didn't help. Panic surged through his chest, stealing his breath. His father's dying voice echoed in his head.

"Please… don't."

Just breathe. Count to five. Calm down. This was not the moment to give in.

But everything inside him tightened into one sharp, painful knot. It hurt as if his own blood were burning through his veins. A gunshot. Norawit squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath as a familiar panic attack took hold. He leaned back against the wall, lightly knocking his head against it a few times. Nausea rose in his throat, and he covered his mouth with his hand.

A man's body. Head thrown back. Slumped lifelessly in a chair.

His throat burned, tears stinging his eyes from the sheer injustice of his life. He had to find those responsible. He had to.

Norawit's fingers brushed the thin hair tie around his wrist, and he swallowed hard.

“If it gets too hard, count and breathe out. And if even inhaling feels impossible, pull the band and let it snap. It’ll help you come back.”

Those were Nattawat’s words, spoken when he had given him this simple but vital thing. The small elastic still carried the faint scent of his dark hair and always made it feel as though Nattawat was holding his hand. Such a small detail, yet it truly helped. And right now, it was exactly what he needed.

He pulled the band and let it snap back against his skin.

The sharp sting jolted him awake. Norawit finally drew a deep breath.

Before his eyes appeared a face with the sweetest smile in the world and the most beautiful eyes. In his ears echoed a voice that turned low and playful when Nattawat flirted with him, but at all other times was gentle and comforting. Soft and calm, like a light snowfall Norawit always admired in winter. Always wrapping him up, warming him with its quiet presence.

He counted to five under his breath and opened his eyes.

The panic eased. The fear loosened its grip.

Nattawat wasn’t even here right now, yet he was helping him without knowing it.

“I’m always with you. Remember that.”

And it was true. He lived constantly in Norawit’s thoughts.

It was terrifying. Truly, horribly terrifying. He had never done anything like this before. Everything could go wrong. He didn’t even know how he would look into the eyes of the man who had murdered his family. He could snap and attack him. Or lose control and kill him.

But no matter how hard this was, he couldn’t show fear. Not for anything in the world.

If he showed weakness, James would know he was bluffing.

Confidence was essential now.

Norawit pulled out the gun and checked it one last time before gripping it firmly in his hand. It made him feel calmer. He had practiced at the shooting range, at least a little. Who knows. These skills might actually come in handy, considering the mess he’d walked into.

If he had come here with a trembling hand, uncertain under the weight of the weapon, he would never have been able to intimidate a bastard like Torrance.

Footsteps echo near the front door, followed by the soft click of the lock. The hallway light flicks on, and a man’s voice murmurs quietly into a phone as he passes the living room and heads for the kitchen. Norawit listens from the other room to the sounds of movement, the rustle of paper bags as groceries are unpacked, and waits patiently for the right moment.

Minutes stretch into an eternity, but he keeps waiting, giving no sign of his presence. Eventually, the homeowner appears in the doorway of the living room. In the dim light spilling in from the hallway, he walks over to the minibar built into the cabinet. He pours himself a glass of whiskey and starts humming some stupid, monotonous tune.

Norawit exhales slowly and silently, then moves.

Now is the perfect moment. If the man turns around, he'll see him too soon — and Norawit is counting on the element of surprise. He moves smoothly, soundlessly, closing in on his target from behind, and presses the gun to the back of the man's head. He applies just enough pressure to make the point clear, his grip steady, his gaze burning through the man's skull.

The man flinches and freezes, instantly realizing this isn't a casual visit. People don't come to him like this without reason. He's done too much shit in his life.

"No panic," Norawit says calmly. "Turn around slowly and sit down. No noise. No sudden moves. I'm here to talk."

"Alright," the man replies, placing the glass back in the bar.

He obeys, lowering himself into the chair. Norawit keeps him at gunpoint, backing away toward the shadowed corner he chose earlier. Torrance tries to make out his face in the darkness and remains surprisingly calm. This clearly isn't his first time in a situation like this.

Norawit switches on a floor lamp and arches a brow as he looks at him.

"Who the hell are you?" James asks, staring straight at him.

"You don't recognize me?" Norawit smirks. "I've changed a lot since the last time we met."

"We've met?"

"We know each other. Indirectly."

"So… we've seen each other before?"

"Once. My name is Norawit Titicharoenrak."

"Titicharoenrak?" James repeats quietly, his voice faltering.

"That's right. Titicharoenrak."

"You…" he exhales, realization dawning. "It's you."

"Me."

For several seconds, Torrance stares at him, panic flickering in his eyes, then swallows hard. Of course he hadn't recognized him at first — but the surname made everything painfully clear. The fear in his gaze, the sweat forming on his forehead, gave him away completely. He never expected that boy would actually find him one day.

“How have you been sleeping all these years, James?”

“Fine,” he answers nervously.

“Because I haven’t. You can guess why.”

“I can,” the man whispers.

“Funny how life turns around sometimes,” Norawit continues, tilting his head. “When I was eleven, you had a gun pointed at me. Now it’s the other way around. Do you remember what you told me back then? ‘One day you might want revenge for what you saw. I’ll be waiting, kid.’ So tell me — were you waiting?”

Torrance’s green eyes flicker with faint regret before he lowers them. He remembers that night too well. There’s nothing he can say. Nothing that could ever absolve him. Whatever the son of those people plans to do to him, he’s earned it.

The murder of the Titicharoenrak family had been just another contract — but that one stayed with him. As they were leaving the scene, he’d noticed the victims’ son sitting on the stairs. The boy had seen everything, sitting perfectly still, too scared to even breathe. His eyes were huge, glassy, filled with tears.

By protocol, the child should have been eliminated too. No witnesses. Ever. But killing him felt cruel — and there hadn’t been time. No one else knew the boy was there. The contract had been for two adults only. So James made a choice and let him live.

He’d wanted to kill him, gun pressed to the child’s forehead — but he didn’t. Damn pity cracked his resolve, and something painfully close to fatherly instinct made him weak. He had a child the same age back then. That mattered. And now that same boy stood in his house.

The past always comes back. Especially when it’s a Pandora’s box stuffed with ugly secrets.

“Listen,” James says quietly. “I know I’m guilty. But apologizing would be stupid, wouldn’t it? I can’t fix this. I can’t bring your parents back. It was my job — one I’m not proud of.”

“Sometimes an apology is all a person needs,” Norawit replies. “Sometimes a simple ‘I’m sorry’ can heal a broken heart, stitch together a soul that’s fallen apart. You just have to find the courage to say it. But this isn’t one of those cases. I didn’t come here for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a privilege you don’t deserve.”

“Then why are you here?” James asks, starting to rise from the chair. “I can’t explain—”

“I wouldn’t,” Norawit interrupts quietly, shaking his head. “Stand up, and you’ll be blown to pieces.”

“What?” James blinks.

“Try it,” Norawit shrugs indifferently. “I’m not joking.”

James eyes him suspiciously, then carefully feels beneath the chair — and freezes when his fingers brush against bundled wires. He listens. Faint, rhythmic clicks count down in the silence.

A bomb.

“You came prepared,” Torrance mutters.

“Life teaches you things when you grow up an orphan,” Norawit says coldly. “I’m not stupid enough to visit a hitman without a gift. I’m sure you’ve got guns stashed all over this house. Men like you tend to make a lot of enemies.”

“What do you want from me?” James asks. “If you wanted me dead, I’d already be.”

“Answers. I want answers.”

“I’m out of that business.”

“I care about the past, not the present.”

“I don’t think I can help you. I worked for people who value anonymity above everything. I never saw my boss. Never knew his name.”

“It’s in your best interest to help me,” Norawit says calmly. “Otherwise, we’ll do this the hard way. If you don’t give me what I need, I’ll keep coming after you until I get something.”

“You threatening me?” James laughs quietly.

“You’re sitting on a bomb. What do you think, idiot?” Norawit smirks.

“And it’s worth it? All your questions?”

“Was it worth killing my parents for what you were paid?” Norawit fires back. “Did you buy this house with that money? A car? Your kids’ education? What’s it like living off the blood of innocent people?”

James says nothing. He exhales heavily, staring at him from under his brow. It hurts because it’s true.

Norawit lowers the gun and walks slowly along the shelves, studying books and photographs. He’s grown — truly grown. No fear in his eyes now. No tears. Just resolve. A man who needs the truth.

“So,” Norawit asks quietly, turning back to him, “who hired you to kill them?”

“I can’t answer that,” James says. “Do whatever you want. I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.”

“Believe me or not — that’s your choice.”

“Who ordered it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t make me use methods I don’t want to,” Norawit says sharply. “I don’t want to become like you. But you’re forcing me. Who ordered it?”

“I told you, I don’t know!” James snaps.

Norawit sighs, sits on the desk, and pulls a folded sheet of paper from his jacket. He unfolds it and reads aloud.

“James Torrance. Forty-seven. Born in San Francisco. Two convictions for armed robbery and drug distribution before relocating to Los Angeles. Member of a criminal organization called Influence, which, by the way, still exists. You know you could go back to prison for that, right? How many years did you work for them? Why’d you leave? Didn’t get along with the boss? Someone like Damian Lim?”

He looks up.

“I don’t care about your boss. I need one client. You’ve got a mother — alive, living in Illinois. Wonder if she’s ashamed of you. Or if she erased you from her life years ago. You had a wife. She died a few years back. Her mother is raising your kids. And funnily enough — they live in this city.”

“Enough,” James growls. “I get it. You dug up dirt on me. What now? Blackmail? Turn me in?”

“What’s the point?” Norawit scoffs. “I don’t trust a single cop in this city.”

“Then why tell me all this?”

“So you understand I’m not that boy you wanted to kill. I know everything about your life — and I can use it. I came prepared. Now I play by your rules. One last time: who ordered it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You said the same thing during interrogation — and walked free. But we both know you were there that night. You killed them. You’re lying.”

“I only know why it happened,” James says quietly.

“Why?”

“My father knew something?,” Norawit repeats, tense.

“He had information. Photos. Videos. Documents. Something physical — otherwise no one would’ve panicked like that. It was more than words. He could’ve ruined someone. We were told to find out if he’d shared it. He knew he’d be killed either way, so he kept it secret. We never found out what it was.”

“On who?” Norawit demands.

“On the man who killed him,” James smirks.

“Are we done speaking in riddles?” Norawit snaps. “Name the client.”

“I don’t know.”

“You expect me to believe contracts like that aren’t controlled?” Norawit presses. “You were paid for their deaths. How does it work?”

“All contracts went through Influence’s leader. No one knows who he is. Could be anyone — a crime boss, a drug lord. We got orders through intermediaries and carried them out.”

“Then take me to them,” Norawit says. “Someone. Anyone who can leak that information.”

“They’ll kill you,” James warns. “You’re just a kid to them. Don’t go near them if you want to live.”

He understands. Perfectly. These people are dangerous. This could end badly.

But if he doesn’t uncover the truth, no one will.

And he can’t let his family’s death remain a blank space.

No.

If nothing else, he has to try.

Norawit studies the photograph of two little girls on a beach and lets out a heavy sigh. He and North have a similar one, standing in his brother’s house. James has two children he barely sees anymore. His wife’s mother doesn’t allow him to take part in raising them—she knows what kind of man he is. He’s a terrible father, but he truly does love them. Maybe that’s why he tried to change his life. Wanted to be better for their sake.
That means this is his weak spot. And this is exactly where the pressure needs to be applied. Otherwise, he won’t say a word. This is his only fear.

“You have beautiful children,” Norawit says quietly, lifting the frame with the photo of his daughters.

“Don’t even think about it,” the man snaps, his gaze instantly turning feral. “If you lay a finger on them, I’ll destroy you. Do you hear me?”

“Abby is twenty-five, and Teresa is eleven, right? Funny. One of your daughters is exactly my age. And the other is the age I was when you put a bullet through my father’s head. Do you think she’d want to take revenge for you the way I want to for mine?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” James shouts, squirming in his chair but not standing up—he’s terrified. “Don’t you dare go near my kids! Don’t touch them!”

“I doubt it would come to that. You’re not very close, are you? Ever wonder why? It’s simple—you’re a piece of shit, James. But even so, it would hurt her to lose you. For some reason, children still love even the most disgusting parents.”
Norawit pauses, staring at the girls’ happy faces.
“But you know… it would be fair if you lost them. You took my parents from me. And I’ll take your children.”

“You won’t do it,” Torrance whispers viciously, forcing a nervous laugh that betrays his sheer panic.

Of course he won’t. Never. Not under any circumstances would he harm innocent people, especially children. But proper manipulation is the most effective weapon, and in this situation, there is no other way. Fear triggers either self-preservation or the instinct to protect the ones you love.

Norawit places the frame back and pulls a wallet from his pocket. He approaches the man slowly, taking out a worn family photograph and holding it up. It shows the people closest to him.

“Do you recognize them?” he asks.

“Your parents,” the man answers.

“Right. That’s my family.”

“Why are you showing me this?” James frowns.

“The boy on the left. See him?”

“So what?”

“That’s my younger brother. You probably didn’t even know he existed. He was eleven—same as me. He saw everything, from beginning to end, hiding in a closet. For a year after that, he didn’t speak at all. He still suffers from the trauma you caused. He has anger issues. He barely sleeps. He’s consumed by a desire for self-destruction. He got addicted to drugs and alcohol trying to survive his depression. His body is covered in tattoos—but only I know what’s under them. Scars. Ones he carved into himself to drown out the pain. I stopped him from killing himself twice.” Norawit’s voice hardens.
“You broke him. You.”

He looks straight into the eyes of the man who took everything from him.

“Have you ever starved for days just to buy food for your little brother? Woken up to him convulsing from a nightmare you can’t pull him out of? Held his hand on the edge of a bridge, ready to die together because life without him meant nothing?” His voice drops to a whisper as he wipes tears from his eyes.
“I don’t think so. I hate you. All of you. Including you. You deserve to die like the worthless creature you are—forgotten by everyone. You’re not a human, not even an animal. You’re worse. You chose this. You made money off other people’s pain. With one shot, you killed

both of us. So you don't know me. And you have no idea what I'm capable of. I will do anything to find the one who destroyed our lives. And one day, I'll destroy him."

"You don't understand," James says hoarsely. "You'll end up just like your father if you don't stop. He was killed to protect a secret. Don't live for revenge. Protect your life."

"My life is worth nothing," Norawit replies flatly. "I stopped caring years ago. I live only for revenge. I have no future—I exist only in the present. I'm ready to die for the truth. I'll step over you and anyone else if I have to, but I will kill the one responsible. And you understand this, don't you? Your wife was murdered too."

He nods slowly, seeing the pain in the man's eyes.

"Yes. The same people you worked for killed her. They punished you."

"I have daughters to live for. I'm not seeking revenge," James says quietly. "Don't ask for my help. If I try anything, they'll kill my girls."

"If you don't give me the name of the one who ordered it," Norawit says calmly, slipping the photo away, "I'll take the very thing you live for. I'll hate doing it—but I will."

He steps back to the table and flips over a large hourglass. About five minutes of sand. Roughly the same amount of time left on the timer inside the fake bomb.

If he learns nothing by then, he'll leave. Torrance will see through him anyway. A loaded gun won't scare a man like this—he's a killer. He's been threatened his whole life.

"Your time has started," Norawit says, nodding at the hourglass.

"I don't know the name," James mutters, watching the sand fall, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Don't lie to me. Think carefully whether this secret is worth your children's lives."

James exhales heavily and tilts his head back. He knows he has no choice. Norawit is resolute, and he has no desire to find out how far he's willing to go.

"When we were given the job, the name Hwang was mentioned. I don't know if it's real or who he is, but it came up once at Influence. I suspect he's directly tied to the organization. Probably a regular client. If you find something on him, you might get closer to the truth. I don't know how else to help—we worked anonymously. I heard the name by accident."

Norawit frowns, running a hand through his hair. Hwang? He doesn't personally know anyone by that name—but he's definitely seen or heard it somewhere. It feels familiar. Too familiar. Damn it. Is he telling the truth?

"That's all you know?" Norawit asks quietly.

"Yes. We got the order, carried it out, and when the investigation started, our bosses covered for us. They had connections in the courts. That's it."

“So the investigation was bought. Of course,” Norawit scoffs, biting the inside of his cheek.

“That’s all I can tell you. If you want revenge on me, do it. It would be fair. Just don’t touch my daughters.”

“I do want revenge,” Norawit whispers. “But not on you. You’re just a tool. I need the one who decided who gets to live and who dies. No secret is worth human lives. I’ll find that bastard sooner or later. No one in this world is untouchable—including him.”

“You’re not even going to hit me? Shoot me?” James asks in disbelief.

“What’s the point of wasting my anger on pawns like you?”

Norawit slides the gun back into his waistband, studies Torrance for a long moment, then turns toward the exit. The man hadn’t given him much—but it was still a lead. The name Hwang felt familiar. That meant it mattered.

Sooner or later, he would find something.

It wouldn’t be easy. The name might not even be real. But no one ever said it would be easy. He’d have to ask Pahn for help again, and try to remember where he’d heard that cursed name before.

“Hey, what about the bomb?” James calls after him, panic breaking through his voice.

“Oh. Right,” Norawit says, stopping. He glances at the clock on the table and smirks. “Sixty seconds. The timer will shut itself off. I hope we never see each other again.”

“Norawit…” the man falters, dropping his gaze. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not enough, but… I’m sorry.”

“Before you die,” Norawit replies coldly, “pray for all the people you killed. They’re the ones who get to forgive you.”

He leaves the house, a quiet sense of pride settling deep in his chest. He could have snapped so easily—could have exploded, torn into that bastard, or simply put a bullet in him. But he understood perfectly well that this man was only an executor.

The real monster was still out there.

And that was where all his hatred belonged.

He wouldn’t waste it on anyone else. When he finally reached the one truly responsible, that creature would receive every last ounce of pain it deserved.

No matter how many times Nattawat came to his father's house, it always felt like a form of perverse psychological torture.

Being within those walls was physically exhausting. The air was perpetually stifling, as if saturated with something toxic. For all its pomp and luxury, the mansion was painfully empty and cold. It was as though the beautiful, expensive façade existed only to conceal the emotional impotence of its owner — a decorative screen hiding rot.

The house where Nattawat had spent several years of his youth had always terrified him with its sheer size. The ceilings were too high, adorned with custom-made chandeliers brought straight from Italy. Their faint crystalline chime irritated him endlessly, the cascading glass elements clinking softly every time the air shifted. The walls were too long, pressing in on him, triggering waves of claustrophobia. The place was filled with antique furniture and porcelain, paintings and books — less a home than a private museum.

He still remembered the moment his father struck him hard across the face for accidentally breaking an expensive porcelain plate. After that, Nattawat preferred not to touch anything in this museum unless absolutely necessary — and only if it was inside his own room. That was the only place he could breathe freely. And even then, not always.

Their father had never understood the concept of personal space — not for Nattawat, not for Night. He would barge into their rooms late at night after work if something occurred to him, wake them without hesitation. He never knocked. He rifled through their belongings whenever he pleased, indifferent to their emotions or health. To him, they were prisoners who owed him everything for their existence.

It wasn't a family. It was a concentration camp.

Every interaction with him was strictly businesslike. Receptions involving his sons existed only to uphold the family image — the most nauseating part of it all. Playing the role of his son was the hardest performance Nattawat had ever endured.

The reputation of a man as respected as Nut Jirochtikul could not be tarnished; his career depended heavily on influence. People whispered about him, but it was all unproven rumor. They shared it quietly, fearfully, terrified he might hear. That was why he hated Nattawat so deeply — Nattawat was a blemish on the family name, one that occasionally forced him to smooth over conflicts.

Even so, his father had managed to twist the narrative to his advantage. He painted himself as the savior who rescued an unfortunate child from the clutches of an alcoholic mother who had abused him — a guardian angel in the eyes of society. None of it was true. The worst abuse of Nattawat's life had happened here, within these walls.

Whatever kind of man Nut Jirochtikul was, only his children knew him completely. He was obsessively devoted to his career and monstrously aggressive. For years he had clawed his

way up from nothing after his first wife stripped him of his business. Perhaps that was why he clung to his power so desperately. He would have sold his sons without hesitation if it meant securing his place in society.

And he had succeeded. Rising from an assistant prosecutor to a judge was no small feat. He now had connections and influence others could only dream of — all built on cooperation with scum, many of whom remained free solely because of him.

Nattawat despised his father for his morals — for his entire way of life. For corruption masquerading as justice. For the fact that people like Damian felt untouchable because men like Nut Jirochtikul existed. Crime flourished in the city because of him. He had plenty of vile traits, but this one was the final insult.

Cruel. Coarse. A sadist. An abuser. A man without conscience or compassion.

And, unfortunately, the blood in Nattawat's and Night's veins was his.

Today, their father had summoned them again to discuss an upcoming formal dinner with his influential friends, soon to be held at the mansion. Once more, they would play the roles of dutiful sons and endure the presence of the city's elite — politicians, millionaires, power brokers.

This was their arrangement.

A few times a month, they pretended to be a proper family. In return, he left them alone and stayed out of their lives. It worked for everyone — except Night. He was the only person in the world who still hoped to see something good in the man who owned this house.

Nattawat paced his father's study, humming a light melody under his breath, while his brother sat silently in an armchair, waiting for the man to finish a phone call so they could discuss the reception. Nut Jirochtikul shot his eldest son an irritated glance and gestured for him to stop.

Nattawat ignored him deliberately, examining the spines of old books while continuing to hum. He enjoyed resisting him in small ways, enjoyed watching anger flicker across his father's face. Disobedience always infuriated him.

They both knew he was powerless now. It was far too late to parent. Ridiculous to think he could control someone he didn't even know.

Nut Jirochtikul hurled a stack of papers at him.

Nattawat turned slowly, wearing the most innocent expression imaginable.

"Could you refrain from irritating me for five minutes?" his father hissed, covering the phone's receiver with his palm. "You're interrupting a conversation with an important person. Shut up."

"You interfere with my life every day," Nattawat replied calmly, returning to what he was doing. "Yet I don't accuse you of it."

“Get out. Come back when I call you.”

“You leave,” Nattawat said evenly. “You’re the one who needs silence.”

“Little bastard,” the man muttered.

He burned a hole into the back of Nattawat’s head with his glare, then rose from behind his desk and resumed the call. Nut Jirochtikul apologized excessively into the phone, threatening Nattawat with a clenched fist — ignored entirely — before leaving the study.

Nattawat smirked, watching him go, then moved quickly to the computer.

It was rare for his father to leave it on and unattended. He needed to check something.

After Norawit told him about a lead he’d uncovered in the investigation into his parents’ murder, Nattawat had begun to suspect that his father might know something. Perhaps he knew who handled the case — who investigated it, who presided over it. And if so, the reason it had been frozen would become clear.

Someone had been paid.

And if Nut Jirochtikul had helped bury the truth, then he might know exactly who did it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Night whispers in disbelief, glancing from his brother to the office door. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Keep it down,” Nattawat hisses back, digging through the computer as he drops into the leather chair.

“If he catches you, he’ll kill you. Get out of there while you still can.”

“Stop whining and stand guard instead. You help your Titicharoenrak, I’ll help mine.”

“What?” his brother frowns, but still moves toward the door to keep an eye on their father. “What are you even talking about?”

“Oh, come on. I know about North,” Nattawat smirks, clicking the mouse rapidly.

“You know what?”

“You, him, the car.”

“What the—”

“Rumors spread fast. You’ve got a pretty recognizable ride. It was seen at the pier.”

“We just drove around and talked.”

“Sure,” Nattawat grins, arching an eyebrow provocatively.

“What?” Night rolls his eyes.

“Nothing. I know those ‘just drove around’ stories. I once ‘just drove around’ with a Titicharoenrak too. Look how that turned out—I’m in way over my head.”

“Go to hell. It doesn’t mean anything. We didn’t even kiss, and you’re talking like we already slept together.”

“What, lost your touch, playboy?”

“Shut up and search faster.”

“I am. But just saying, if North is as hot as his brother, you’re definitely headed for paradise,” Nattawat chuckles quietly.

“Oh please. You’re head over heels yourself. When did you finally admit it?” Night teases.

“Buzz off,” Nattawat snorts, smiling. “That was ages ago.”

“Yeah. Last week,” Night says.

Nattawat laughs, typing in the search bar, the surname and first name of Norawit’s father, trying to find anything connected to the investigation into his murder. Nut had an enormous database of classified work files, every major case he or his colleagues had ever handled. It gave Nattawat hope. Maybe there were records, details, something left behind.

Titicharoenrak would never get access to this on his own. No connections, no clearance. But this, this might bring him closer to the truth.

“So,” Nattawat asks casually, still searching, “you like him?”

“Maybe you’ll shut up and hurry? He’s almost done,” Night mutters, trying to change the subject.

“Either way, you’re already on his side,” Nattawat ignores him. “And you need to understand —if you get involved with him in any way, no matter what kind, you don’t get the right to screw it up.”

“What do you mean?”

“You treat him like the most fragile treasure,” Nattawat says, suddenly serious, meeting his brother’s eyes. “And never—do you hear me?—never hurt him. You don’t get to fool around and walk away. You don’t get to play friends and disappear. He doesn’t work like that. He won’t let just anyone close. If you have other intentions, leave him alone before he gets attached. Or I’ll kill you myself.”

“I don’t want to hurt him,” Night replies quietly. “I don’t know what happened to him, but I can see that he’s…” He stops under Nattawat’s stare. “Good. Despite how he looks on the outside.”

“Good. It’s better that you understand that,” Nattawat smirks. “Otherwise you’ll have to deal with my boyfriend.”

Suddenly, he stumbles upon an interesting folder and quickly scrolls through it. Finally, there it is. He forwards several documents to his email, deletes the sent messages, and scans one of the official files. His expression darkens.

“Fuck. I was right.”

“About what?” Night asks.

“Our father was supposed to be the judge on the case of their parents’ murder. Officially, the case never even made it to court. Lack of evidence. No suspect. The investigation was frozen. Buried. I’d bet anything he was paid off.”

“Their parents were murdered?” Night whispers, blinking rapidly. “How do you even know all this? Who did it? Why?”

“That’s what Norawit is trying to find out. But North can’t know.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too much for him. He doesn’t know Norawit is searching for the truth. And if he finds out… he might spiral back into alcohol or drugs.”

“Wait. Their parents were killed, and no one was punished? Is this a joke?”

“If only. And the worst part? Our father helped their killers walk free,” Nattawat whispers.

“Jesus Christ,” Night exhales.

“Yeah. Which means he might know who ordered it, if I’m right,” Nattawat adds thoughtfully.

“So what do we do?”

Angry shouting erupts in the hallway, followed by hurried footsteps. Nattawat finishes transferring the files, wipes any trace, and returns to where he’d been before. Night drops into a chair, staring at his brother in disbelief. How does he know so much about the Titicharoenrak family? Did Norawit tell him all this?

Unbelievable.

Those guys don’t open up easily, and yet Nattawat knows things that personal. Their relationship is clearly much deeper than it looks.

Their father storms into the office, visibly furious. One look at his face says the day hasn’t gone his way. He drops into his chair, swears viciously, and drags his hands down his face.

“What happened, Daddy?” Nattawat asks with open sarcasm, flipping through a random book. “Did a dirty deal fall apart?”

“None of your business, you idiot,” Nut snaps.

“Ouch,” Nattawat drawls with a grin. “How rude. Though honestly, who’s surprised anymore? You’re only the perfect father in public.”

“Close your mouth before you push me too far. I’m already in a bad mood.”

“Or what? You’ll kick me out? Whip me with a belt?” Nattawat laughs, crossing his arms. “I’m not Night. Sorry, brother, nothing personal.”

“Fuck you,” Night says calmly.

“Let’s get to the point,” Nattawat says, irritation flashing in his eyes. “I’ve got plans today.”

“What kind? Ruining your life?” Nut sneers.

“Yeah. And continuing to be the bastard you love calling me.”

“I should’ve never dragged you out of that hole you lived in,” Nut growls, pouring himself a drink. “You’re arrogant and uncontrollable.”

Nattawat laughs softly, running a hand through his hair, staring at him with disgust.

“Unfortunate, right? You never wanted me, and yet I just won’t disappear. You’d have strangled me long ago if it weren’t for one big ‘but.’ Your precious reputation. I’d happily ignore you, but there’s someone you love taking your anger out on. So tell me, who is this circus really for? Everyone already knows what kind of shit you are. They’re just afraid to say it out loud.”

“Nattawat,” Night warns quietly.

“Don’t forget, you’re flesh and blood of this shit,” Nut sneers.

“Just because you came at the wrong time doesn’t make you my father,” Nattawat says coldly, leaning over the desk. “You never were and never will be. You’re incapable of it. So tell me, what do you want from me this time?”

“Have I told you how much I can’t stand you?” Nut whispers.

“Every day of my miserable life.”

“I’ve had nothing but problems from your filthy mother since the day I met her. And when she died like a gutter whore, you became the problem. You should’ve died in the womb.”

Each word hits like a slap. Nattawat would be lying if he said it didn’t hurt. Words like that cut deep, especially when they come from your own father. He stares at him in stunned silence, barely blinking.

Nut had said many cruel things before, but this… this hurt.

How could anyone say that to their own child? Planned or not. He never understood why his father hated him and his mother so fiercely. It was the same woman who gave birth to Night.

The same woman Nut once chose, married, lived with. So where did all that hatred come from?

Probably because Nattawat lived with her.

As Nut's relationship with Esther deteriorated, all that hatred transferred to the child. Even her name sent him into uncontrollable rage.

"Angry?" Nut smirks. "Grow up. It's stupid to be angry about what you already know. Your mother was a cheap whore I pulled out of some hole in Georgia. Though," he laughs, shaking his head, "she cost me a fortune. Especially in her last years. God knows where the money went, but not on you. She didn't care about your existence."

Nattawat breathes heavily, rage filling every cell of his body. Nut watches him closely, takes a slow sip of whiskey, sets the glass down.

A sadist. Feeding on pain, his own son's pain.

They say you don't choose your family. Nattawat would give anything not to have been born into this one.

At least he wasn't like him. Not inside. He'd taken more from his mother. Though unfortunately, some features were the same. Only the eyes—Esther's eyes—set him apart.

"You even look at me like she did," Nut says with disgust.

"Funny, right?" Nattawat smirks. "She hated you just as much. And she had plenty of reasons. She wasn't perfect, but you're pure trash. A corrupt bastard who protects murderers and drug dealers. And you're a city judge?" He scoffs. "I could destroy your spotless reputation if I wanted."

"You threatening me?"

"Or what? You'll kill me too? Like you did her?"

"Nattawat, what are you saying?" Night blurts out.

"Watch your mouth," Nut snaps. "I never laid a finger on that bitch. Though she deserved it."

"Isn't it logical? You hated each other for years. She drained you for money. I'm almost certain you know what really happened to her."

"Of course I do. Your mother was drunk, slipped in the bathtub, hit her head on the tile, and died."

"I don't believe that. And the more I learn about you, the less I believe it. You could've hired someone to get rid of the inconvenience."

"You're an idiot," Nut laughs. "I don't dirty my hands."

“You dirtied them a long time ago. Hundreds of lives are on your conscience.”

“Back to business. Behave at the reception. Smile. Don’t be rude. Speak only if spoken to. Dress properly. Take off your jewelry. Don’t insult important guests. Don’t smoke in the house—”

“Better yet, don’t breathe?” Nattawat smirks.

“You know what’s expected. Be normal. Just once.”

“If I’m such a terrible son, why play my father? You’ve got Night. You don’t hate him like you hate me.”

“I hate you both. But you’re necessary. My guests know I have two sons. You’re good-looking, you carry my name. You could be a profitable match someday. It benefits all of us.”

“I’m not merchandise,” Nattawat snarls, grabbing him by the collar. “Say that again and you’ll drown in your own filth. Same deal as always. I behave. You leave me alone until next month.”

“But I’ll still—”

“I don’t care. After the reception, Night and I are free. Or do you want me to really entertain your guests? Think carefully. I’m trash, remember? I can act like it.”

“Fine,” Nut snaps. “Get lost.”

“Gladly, Daddy,” Nattawat smirks. “See you.”

He leaves without looking back. Staying five more minutes would’ve ended in blood. They were incapable of anything else, always competing over who could hurt the other more.

The hatred had always been mutual.

And if once he hoped things might change… now he knows they never will.

Nattawat sits in his Mustang for a few minutes, nervously tapping his fingers against the steering wheel, calming himself with a cigarette. He’s angry, deeply disappointed, and yet, on some level, he understands that his father’s words are true.

His life is a mess. Pure shit. Completely ruined from the moment he was conceived right up to today. He has never been truly needed by anyone, and even the one woman he genuinely loved couldn’t love him back. Maybe the problem is him. After all, what is there to love?

He gets home quickly, bleeding off the tension on the road. He weaves through the streets, pushing the car harder than necessary, and for a moment it helps, an improvised race with himself taking the edge off. But the heaviness inside him doesn’t go away. It never does.

After every meeting with his father, the same filthy feeling clings to him, like he's bathed in something foul and can't wash it off.

Poker used to help. Now he won't let himself go back to it, he knows he'd spiral. He's barely holding it together as it is, especially after the casino.

He climbs the stairs to his apartment slowly and freezes on the last step when he notices a small gift lying on the doormat.

What is this?

Nattawat looks around, down the stairs, then up, as if hoping to catch whoever left it. He approaches the door cautiously and picks up a box tied with a yellow ribbon. It has a pleasant weight to it, and there's a soft clink inside, something fragile.

Inside the apartment, he sinks onto the couch and picks up the small note resting on top. The handwriting is a little uneven, slightly clumsy:

Once, I told you that my life feels like an amusement ride, and I'm sitting in a cabin with no safety belts. I'm going too fast, and I'm terrified of falling. But now, as I'm picking up speed, I've realized something, I have a safety belt. You.

You give me such a strong sense of safety that I trust you with my life. Thank you for not letting me fall.

P.S. I think another brick has been laid. Don't you?
P.S.S. You probably don't think so yet, so I'll keep trying. Be careful with the gift, it's fragile.

Norawit.

Nattawat smiles instantly, a wave of overwhelming relief washing over him as he realizes it's from him. Just the thought of Norawit brings him a peace so powerful it quiets all the emotions tearing him apart. A surprise. No reason, no occasion, just because.

So thoughtful. Almost romantic.

God, it feels incredible to receive attention without having to earn it. This might be the first gift he's ever gotten that truly surprises him in the best way.

He sets the note aside and unties the ribbon. Inside the box is a small figurine—simple, but deeply meaningful. A symbol of their first date. A direct hit to the heart.

A miniature Ferris wheel stands on a tiny pedestal, the very one on the Santa Monica pier where they'd walked together. Nattawat presses a small button, and the wheel begins to turn slowly, a soft melody playing as tiny lights blink on in the cabins. It's so beautiful he just stares at it for nearly a full minute, transfixed.

The pier. That night. He smiles, hopelessly in love.

It’s the little souvenir he’d liked most in one of the shops. Norawit remembered. Remembered and went back for it just to buy it for him.

Isn’t that insane?

Yeah. And unbearably sweet.

Nattawat understands what Titicharoenrak is trying to tell him, and what he’s thanking him for. And Nattawat has so much to thank him for in return. This is the least he can do: simply be there. Give himself fully.

He has no intention of abandoning him in this difficult moment in his life. He couldn’t even if he wanted to. Norawit needs him. Trusted him. Let him in. Shared his most intimate truths and wasn’t afraid to be real with him.

He gave him his soul, the most fragile thing he has.

It’s a huge step for both of them.

And now, it feels like it’s Nattawat’s turn.

MiMS — Move (If You Wanna)

Dorothy — Missile

Dead Posey — Freak Show

Michele Morrone — Drink Me

CORPSE — Miss YOU!

Christina Aguilera — Not Myself Tonight Shaker — In The Dark

The race on the Loop among bikers always draws just as much excitement and attention as the car runs do.
But it’s far more thrilling to watch it unfold on the streets of the night city. Unlike cars, whose routes constantly change, motorcycles have their own track, and it hasn’t changed in years. It’s done for safety: every rider knows each turn by heart and can fully control the situation. It significantly lowers the risk of anyone getting killed.

Nattawat strides toward the crowd gathered at the starting line, where the motorcycles are already lining up. People form a wide ring around them, forcing him to squeeze through to get closer. He only needs a few minutes before the race begins. Just a tiny sliver of time—to see Norawit, to kiss him for luck, and to do it before the signal is given.

He wants Norawit to know he's there, watching him. That matters, doesn't it? It really does. When the person you care about comes to support you in a race, it gives you strength. At least, Nattawat loves seeing Titicharoenrak cheering for him alongside the others. Norawit is always the most important spectator. And honestly, there's no reward more valuable than his smile. And when that usually reckless guy climbs over the barrier after the finish line just to run up and kiss his winner, there is no one happier than Nattawat in that moment.

He pushes through the hyped-up crowd and scans the area for a familiar black bike. Five racers stand at the starting line, listening to last-minute encouragement from their supporters. They all look calm, no trace of nerves. Some people are still placing bets, money passing from hand to hand, and Nattawat suddenly realizes he doesn't see that painfully familiar shock of light brown hair anywhere.

Is Titicharoenrak not racing tonight?

He wouldn't just not show up. He never skips races unless something's wrong.

"Lose someone, baby?" a playful voice sounds behind him, and Nattawat immediately breaks into a wide smile.

His main prize, the one he wants most, is right here after all.

He turns sharply and sees Norawit lounging against his motorcycle, casually leaning on it with the most sinful part of his body, running a hand through his hair with a cocky grin. Such a simple, familiar move, and yet it effortlessly knocks Nattawat off balance, confident and composed as he usually is.

Is that even normal?

His knees go weak like a lovesick schoolgirl the moment those plush lips curl into a smirk. Norawit knows exactly how powerful his charm is, especially over him. He knows how attractive he is, and shamelessly uses it.

Titicharoenrak slowly, deliberately looks him over from head to toe, and desire sparks instantly in his eyes. He doesn't just ignite like a match—he goes up like pure fuel, the kind that's hard to put out. He clearly likes what he sees. Nattawat is damn glad he made an effort tonight: a simple white tank top, a jacket, his favorite jeans. And only now does it hit him—this is the first time he's actually cared this much about how he looks for someone.

All because of him.

What the hell is happening to him?

Norawit tilts his head, smirks, then crooks a finger, beckoning him closer like a predator luring its prey. Nattawat chuckles, points at himself, and looks around as if confused about who he's calling.

"You. Obviously you, handsome ass," Titicharoenrak laughs. "Come here. You were looking for me."

"You so sure? I came to watch the race and make a little money on bets," Nattawat replies indifferently, yet still walks toward him.

"Are we playing that game again where you're not my boyfriend?" Norawit laughs.

"Just so you don't relax for even a second. I could stop being one at any moment."

"Get over here already. I missed you."

I missed you.

Such simple words, and yet Nattawat melts instantly, like ice cream under the summer sun, nearly puddling onto the asphalt. He has to physically restrain himself from running straight into Norawit's arms, from grinning like an idiot.

How can this man be a reckless, unhinged biker one second, and then switch into the softest, most charming person alive the next? Somehow, with him, Norawit is gentle, caring, sweet… and that duality is lethal. Nattawat knows he's not like this with everyone.

He stops just one step away, at arm's length. Norawit narrows his eyes, annoyed, then pulls him into a tight embrace and exhales in contentment, eyes closing. He hugs him so hard Nattawat's ribs almost ache, and Nattawat laughs softly in response.

They'd been waiting for this all day. For the first time in a long while, they'd slept separately, each in their own place. Titicharoenrak had been forced to revisit loneliness, with only Jumu for company, something that used to be his normal life. One whole damn night and day without him, and it had been torture.

Turns out, he was weak when it came to him.

His daily source of strength and happiness had big brown eyes, a sweet smile, and smelled like blooming cherry trees. That was it. The secret was that simple.

Norawit's heart was pounding wildly in his chest, faster than it ever did during a race at insane speed, and he knew he was done for. Completely. This was better than any chemical rush, and yes, he was absolutely addicted to this feeling.

He'd even noticed that, lately, his urge to escape reality with alcohol had weakened. Not vanished, but lessened. And that mattered.

Nattawat doesn't even like the smell of alcohol on him, and that alone had become enough to stop him from drinking. Because if he did, his boyfriend wouldn't kiss him or stay the night. At some point, Titicharoenrak realized he didn't need alcohol to feel good anymore.

He just needed him.

Nattawat intoxicated him far more easily than any gin ever could.

Changing yourself completely isn't easy, but he was trying. Small steps along a long road. And somehow, he hadn't touched alcohol in over a week. Not even his favorite beer.

Nattawat slips an arm around his shoulders, feeling warm hands tighten around his waist like a lifebuoy in a stormy sea. It feels so good—to be important. Not just needed, but truly important. To someone who wants to start and end their day with you.

Maybe it's nothing special to some people, but not to him.

Only with Norawit does he get to feel this.

Norawit has a way of making the whole world revolve around him, and it's dangerously intoxicating. No one has ever treated Nattawat with such care, tenderness, and passion all at once. Every day, he shows him how precious love can be.

They're both crazy about each other. Even crazier apart.

Eighteen hours separated them, and it felt like a lifetime.

Now, wrapped in his arms, breathing in the scent of watermelon from his skin, Nattawat feels like he's finally home.

"I missed you too," he says honestly, smiling.

"A whole night without you," Titicharoenrak sighs. "No one snored in my ear."

"No one grabbed my ass," Nattawat replies.

"No one sprawled across the bed trying to push me off."

"No one held my fingers like a little kid."

"And no one jumped me in the morning, trying to ride me."

"Sounds like a terrible morning," Nattawat laughs, peppering him with quick kisses.

"Disgusting," Norawit says, sliding his hands down and squeezing his ass hard. "Knowing that this perfect ass was so far away from me was deeply upsetting."

"You're hopeless," Nattawat smirks.

"Don't tell me you didn't regret it when you woke up. I know how hungry you get in the mornings."

"I'm always hungry when it comes to you."

Norawit surges forward and kisses him hard. Nattawat parts his lips instantly, letting his tongue in with a pleased moan, fingers threading into the hair at his nape, tugging gently as Norawit kisses him like they haven't seen each other in forever.

If not for the crowd, he'd climb him right here.

He's missed his touch, his lips, the sound of his breath and quiet moans so badly that now he's melting under it all, desire and emotion spilling over, goosebumps racing across his skin.

A satisfied whistle comes from somewhere nearby. Norawit smiles into the kiss, then gently pulls back. He throws a glance at the familiar guys, flips them off, then turns back and brushes Nattawat's lips with his again. Yes, he's kissing his boyfriend in front of everyone. That same legendary racer from the Loop. And it still shocks people.

"Fuck off. Yeah, I'm completely screwed," he shouts, laughing.

"They still won't let it go?" Nattawat smiles, flicking a quick look toward Norawit's friends.

"They're still teasing me. What about yours?"

"Same idiots."

"Jealousy looks ugly on them," Titicharoenrak grins and kisses him softly again.

"By the way," Nattawat says, looping his arms around Norawit's neck, "I didn't come here for no reason."

"Oh?" Norawit asks. "And what did you want?"

"First—to say thank you. You seriously went back to Santa Monica just to get me that souvenir? The exact one I liked? You're completely unhinged."

"Yeah, that's definitely on my list of sins," Norawit replies, smiling charmingly. "But it was worth it. At least now you'll look at it and remember our first date."

"Well then, that makes it five to four," Nattawat sighs, running his fingers through Norawit's hair and pushing it back. "The date was amazing—spontaneous, sure, but amazing. You gave me beautiful memories and one hell of a firework. I'll keep that night buried deep in my heart."

"I'm really glad to hear that, Natt. I always knew I wasn't great at dates, but I hope I can get better. And that we'll have plenty more."

"We will," Nattawat says quietly.

"And second?" Titicharoenrak asks.

"I came to support you. A good-luck kiss for my boyfriend." Nattawat kisses his cheek, tilting his face gently by the chin.

“Mmm. My boyfriend,” Norawit hums, eyes fluttering shut. “God, that sounds insanely sexy coming from you.”

“I’ll be waiting for you at the finish line, with a win. Be careful, okay?”

“Could it be any other way?” Norawit asks, hugging him tighter. “Trust me.”

“I trust you,” Nattawat exhales. “It’s the motorcycle I don’t trust.”

“That won’t do,” Titicharoenrak frowns, stepping back. “We need to fix that.”

He turns, swings a leg over the bike with ease, and settles into the seat. Rolling forward slightly, he nods toward the empty space behind him. Nattawat squints suspiciously.

“No,” he drawls, shaking his head. “No. Don’t even think about it.”

“Come on. I’m waiting,” Titicharoenrak says calmly.

“I’m not getting on.”

“What, scared, great racer?” Norawit teases.

“No. You’ve got a race,” Nattawat gestures around. “I don’t want to mess with your plans.”

“Plans just changed. Today’s a trust test. You need to make peace with my ride. It’s simply unacceptable to date a biker and never ride with him.”

“What does that even mean? Who came up with this?” Nattawat crosses his arms. “I’m fine with you without all this. I already can’t get along with your cat. Your whole environment is… specific.”

Norawit laughs, remembering the ongoing cold war between Nattawat and Jumu. They still get jealous of each other, and the cat regularly reminds the frequent guest who the real favorite is, with teeth and claws.

“You said yourself I’m a good driver, no matter the vehicle. Right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Get on. I’ll show you what my baby can do,” Norawit says, winking playfully. “And no, I don’t mean you.”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” Nattawat mutters, wrinkling his nose.

“Hey. You said you trust me.”

“I do. It’s just… it’s a damn motorcycle. I don’t get along with them.”

“You’re just a passenger. I’m the driver. Rely on me. You don’t know real adrenaline until you’ve been in a paired race.”

“A paired race?” Nattawat repeats skeptically. “I don’t like how that sounds. I don’t even want to know what it is. It’s obviously dangerous.”

“Of course it is,” Titicharoenrak smiles. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Then Norawit smirks strangely and scans the crowd. Nattawat follows his gaze and spots a familiar girl with blue hair—Pahn—who never misses a race. Norawit whistles sharply.

“Hey, baby!”

“What do you want, Gem?” she asks, popping her gum.

“What are the cops saying? Any raids?”

“All clear. Why?”

“People! Plans change! We’re doing a paired race!” Norawit shouts, pointing at one of the guys. “Kit, get the riders ready!”

“Already on it,” the man grins, rubbing his hands.

Nattawat stares, stunned, as cheers and whistles erupt. Only later would he learn how rare paired races were, how often they ended in crashes. They’d even been banned for a while. But bikers are maniacs, addicted to risk.

“They always listen to you like that?” Nattawat asks.

“One day someone will beat me,” Norawit replies. “He’ll be the new king. Then they’ll listen to him.”

“Impressive,” Nattawat smirks. “I’m dating a king.”

“We’re a pair of kings,” Norawit grins.

“What kind of race is this?” Nattawat asks warily.

“A biker trust test. I’m taking you into a real race.”

“You’re doing what?”

“I’ll be twice as focused on safety, because your life depends on me. A paired race is teamwork. We move as one. Your job is not to interfere. If you jerk or pull, we lose balance, and we fall. I don’t need to explain what that means at speed.”

“So you’re asking me to voluntarily sign my death warrant?” Nattawat scoffs. “You know I can’t sit still. And this is a race, you’ll ride like a lunatic.”

“Learn to feel speed instead of chasing it,” Norawit says softly. “There’s a difference.”

“Fantastic. That’s very reassuring,” Nattawat mutters, eyeing the bike.

“My Triumph may be old, but she’s tuned and obedient. I control her like my own hands. If this goes well, you’ll rethink motorcycles. So here’s my only question, I trust you with my life one hundred percent. How much do you trust me with yours?”

He extends his hand.

Nattawat’s gaze flicks between the hand and Norawit’s face. It’s dangerous. Insanely dangerous. But Norawit knows what he’s doing. He’d never risk someone else if he wasn’t sure.

Around them, others mount bikes without hesitation, trusting their riders completely. It’s brutal, but effective. Like falling backward and believing someone will catch you.

“You don’t have to do this,” Norawit says gently. “Nothing will change between us if you don’t.”

“Ninety,” Nattawat says, taking his hand and climbing on behind him. “I trust you ninety percent. Bring me back in one piece and you earn five more.”

“And the last five?” Norawit smirks.

“I’m saving them. Pass my test, and it’s a solid hundred. Street racers have trust tests too. Pass it, and I’m yours forever.”

“That sounds dangerously tempting,” Titicharoenrak smiles.

“Win the race and don’t kill us,” Nattawat says. “Deal?”

“Biker rule,” Norawit says, revving the engine. “Drop your passenger, marry them. I’m very tempted to lose today.”

“That rule only applies while mounting,” Nattawat laughs. “If we crash during the race, we’ll just get buried together.”

He wraps his arms around Norawit carefully, presses against his back, and exhales shakily at the starting line. The noise, the vibration, the heat of Norawit’s body—it makes him feel small, exposed, alive.

Norawit checks his position, squeezes Nattawat’s knee reassuringly, then takes his hand briefly before settling it back on his waist. A silent promise.

Engines roar. The crowd clears. The countdown begins.

With each number, Nattawat’s pulse spikes. All or nothing. Life or victory.

“Go.”

They launch forward.

One. Two. Three.

The first seconds are always unreal. Wind slams into him, his heart explodes with adrenaline. He doesn't even realize he's squeezed his eyes shut until Norawit overtakes another rider and Nattawat clutches him tighter, breath held.

When was the last time he was afraid of a race?

A long time ago.

And yet—here he is, thrown back into that past, trusting only one man in the world to carry him through it.

Norawit's control of the motorcycle was smooth, skilled, and impeccably careful. The speed was truly high, but not reckless. Still, it was something you could feel almost with your skin, with every single cell in your body. This was what he had meant when he said you had to learn to feel it. There were probably unspoken limits to this kind of race because of the passengers. And despite the obvious rivalry, there was a sense of mutual respect between them. No one tried to cut another off or take stupid, unnecessary risks. When the moment called for it, the riders twisted the throttle, but just as instinctively they knew when to ease off. Maybe not everyone rode this way, but these guys were clearly not the type to risk everything just to win at any cost. They had complete control over what was happening and were utterly focused. Each of them watched their rivals closely, ready to help at any second, while also keeping an eye on their own bikes.

When you drive a car, you don't feel even half of what a motorcycle can give you. That insane vulnerability, being just one step away from being thrown off and crushed under someone else's wheels, is both terrifying and mesmerizing at the same time. That's where the unique charm of riding lies. You feel like you're flying. There's no metal shell around you, only the feeling of freedom filling your lungs as the wind wraps around your body from every side. It feels like wings are growing behind your back, like you want to stretch your arms out and surrender to the rush. The low growl of the engine fills your ears, and beneath your feet there's nothing but asphalt. It's a real race with death, dangerous beyond reason and irresistibly alluring.

Jirochtikul could feel how fast they were tearing through one of the streets of Los Angeles, the road half-empty as they smoothly carved through familiar turns. Again and again, Norawit traded the lead with one of the guys, the sound of engines close enough to tell who was right beside them. Slowly, fear began to spread evenly through Jirochtikul's body, feeding the adrenaline in his blood until it burned hotter and hotter. It was incredible. He had never experienced such a concentrated rush of that craving hormone anywhere else. This was better than any other madness he had ever chased in his life.

Even without opening his eyes, he managed to feel absolute pleasure, not needing to see what was happening. The speed. The way Titicharoenrak carefully tilted the bike from side to side, slipping effortlessly out of each lean. He felt the road so precisely, balanced the speeds so perfectly, that Jirochtikul gradually began to feel completely safe with him and simply let himself enjoy it. Yes, he understood the danger. He knew that at any second things could go wrong, that not everything depended on the rider. But damn it, he loved this so much. It was dizzyingly beautiful, so vivid and alive. And this, too, became another beautiful memory Titicharoenrak gifted him, settling deep inside his heart.

Norawit had been absolutely right, this was a whole different level of danger. Even though the speed was much lower than what Jirochtikul usually squeezed out of his car, the feeling was so intoxicating it almost made him gasp for air. His heart raced in sync with the motorcycle's engine, and he kept holding his breath, his head spinning slightly from the overwhelming euphoria.

Finally, he slowly opened his eyes and looked ahead, squinting against the powerful rush of wind. Everything around them blurred past in frantic flashes, leaving only smeared shapes in his focus. There was just one motorcycle riding alongside them now, lagging by half a body, while the others fell behind. Jirochtikul was afraid to make a single unnecessary movement, knowing it could affect the ride. He loosened his grip slightly, giving Titicharoenrak a bit more freedom. Norawit swerved sharply, leaning the bike, and they shot to the right, overtaking their rival, but the guy on the white bike wasn't ready to give up so easily. He shifted too, pushing forward and gunning the throttle. They traded the lead several times like this, each pass making Jirochtikul's insides clench tighter with fear. It drove him insane, and at the same time, it felt like breathing new life into him.

The motorcycles nearly collided during another risky maneuver, but Norawit reacted faster and tore victory away from his opponent. A joyful shout burst from Jirochtikul's chest on its own, and his driver smiled brightly when he heard it. The intensity of it all made Jirochtikul's palms sweat, his fingertips tingling. At every next turn, he mirrored Titicharoenrak's movements—not exactly, but halfway—following him like a shadow, complementing every motion. At some point, they became one.

All it took was trust – unblinking, absolute trust. He quickly realized the most important rule of this kind of race: the fewer movements, the less risk. Just like Norawit, he focused on the exit of every turn, pressed lightly on the inner footpeg, and surrendered to the moment, letting go of every fear inside him. He relaxed, shutting off common sense completely. When you truly understand what's happening on the road, riding becomes infinitely more thrilling. All doubts fade away, your heart slams against your ribs, adrenaline bubbles in your throat, your pupils dilate, and the world explodes into sharper, brighter colors. And crowning this volatile mix is the wild desire to win. A thrill you could never get from a card game—because in poker, you don't gamble with your life against death itself.

Before the next turn, Titicharoenrak eased off slightly and entered it flawlessly, leaning the bike with elegant precision. And Jirochtikul realized just how good they were together—as one team. His heart skipped another beat because of this man. Together, they were stronger than they could ever be apart. United, they were almost invulnerable, yet their weakness lay in each other. Like a single mechanism that couldn't function without its counterpart. Norawit was the engine, and Nattawat was the fuel. One was the ignition, the other the perfectly fitting key. They understood each other in everything—and most importantly, they knew how to accept one another. All the secrets, the hidden truths, the deepest desires. No conditions. No exceptions.

As they burst onto the final straight, Nattawat glanced back and saw two riders close behind them, almost breathing down their necks. On the straightaway, Norawit twisted the throttle hard, and they surged toward the waiting crowd. And when victory was only a mile away, you finally understood why you climbed behind the wheel every time and risked your life—

the taste of winning, speed and the intoxication it brings, adrenaline and the feeling of total control. Whatever prize waited at the end, the most valuable thing was always what stayed inside you—the sensations. The ones nothing in the world could give you except a race.

The crowd erupted in deafening cheers as Titicharoenrak crossed the finish line first. They expected him to stop, like always, to celebrate together—but this time, he simply rode past them. He didn't want to share this victory with anyone else. It belonged only to him and Nattawat. He carried him away from the noise, down a long, empty road where there would be no chaos or prying eyes when they stopped. He didn't want to share this private moment, seeing his passenger's eyes shining with exhilaration, with anyone. He brought Jirochtikul home, stopping near the tall fence in the crowded parking lot, glancing up at the familiar second-floor windows. He had never been inside, but he already knew where they were. He cut the engine and finally let out a relieved breath.

Nattawat sat still for a few seconds, silent, breathing hard as he continued to cling to him. His emotions were still raging inside, breaking him down into tiny atoms. His blood raced, tension coiling deep within him—because with adrenaline always came another powerful feeling, one he knew all too well: desire. It sharpened every time he got a massive rush like this. He bit his lip, trying to calm himself, then slowly slid his hands over the man's stomach and pressed a wet kiss to his neck, sighing softly.

"You're welcome," Titicharoenrak laughed gently, taking off his helmet.

"Wow," Jirochtikul said, kissing him several more times. "I can't even string two words together to describe what I'm feeling right now."

"I told you you'd like it. You worried for nothing."

"I really did like it," Nattawat said, climbing off the bike on legs still slightly shaky from the race.

"So," Norawit asked, "what do you think about the bike now?"

"Maybe we can get along," Jirochtikul smiled, raking a hand through his hair. "But it really does take a lot of effort."

"I could give you riding lessons. Want to?"

"Yes. I really do," he replied, studying him closely.

Norawit set the bike on its center stand and stepped back, freeing the driver's seat. He patted it lightly, and Jirochtikul gave him a mysterious grin. Jirochtikul stepped closer and sat down again—but this time facing him, his back to the handlebars. Titicharoenrak lifted an eyebrow in surprise and moved closer.

Nattawat is practically straddling him, one hand sliding up to his neck and gripping it, pulling him in roughly. He kisses him so deeply that they both forget they're standing right out on the street. Neither of them cares. In response, Norawit's hands glide over his thighs and he lets out a long, needy moan, as if this is exactly what he's been waiting for, while Nattawat wraps

his arms tightly around his shoulders. They're breathing so loudly and heavily it feels like they could be heard on the other side of the world. Their mutual desire crashes over them like a tsunami, sudden and overwhelming, swallowing them whole.

"Baby, you do realize the handlebars are on the other side, right?" Titicharoenrak smirks.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Nattawat replies, brushing his lips along his neck.

"Adrenaline does interesting things to you, huh?" Norawit whispers, his palm sliding over the noticeable bulge at Nattawat's groin.

"You mean it makes me feel like a horny teenager with raging hormones?"

"I mean, I could fuck you right here on the bike," Norawit says lightly, "but I'm pretty sure we'd be sprawled on the asphalt in about a minute."

Nattawat grabs his face and kisses him greedily, like he's suffocating and Norawit is his only source of air. Desire burns deep inside him, making his breath come out hot enough to scorch skin. His hands roam impatiently over Norawit's body, and he nips at his tongue.

"What's gotten into you, Natt?" Norawit chuckles against his lips as Nattawat hurriedly starts unbuckling his belt.

"What, can't you tell? I'm hitting on you," he says, kissing him again.

"We're literally outside, wait. I'm not—"

"Shut up," Nattawat whispers, fist clenching in his T-shirt. "We're going to my place. And you don't get to say no right now."

"Just like that? Who do you take me for?" Norawit laughs, helping him off the motorcycle before getting up himself and kissing him again, harder this time.

Nattawat backs toward the porch without breaking the kiss, barely thinking at all. They struggle up the short staircase, just three steps, and he ends up with his back pressed to the wooden lobby door. Norawit's hands slide possessively under his tank top, pulling their heated bodies together as close as possible. He kisses him so insistently that a deep, satisfied groan escapes Nattawat's chest on its own, his fingers burying themselves in Norawit's soft brown hair in response. He fumbles blindly for his keys in his jacket and laughs when he can't unzip the pocket, his fingers clumsy thanks to distracting, hungry lips. Norawit peppers his neck with kisses, breathing so deeply and so sexily that Nattawat can't help but close his eyes, savoring the sound.

"I can't go to your place, you know that," Norawit says with a grin, lightly biting the delicate skin at his collarbone.

"And why not?" Nattawat asks, breathless with arousal.

"It would be my first time there. You promised you'd invite me over and cook dinner. This won't do. I'm a respectable guy."

“Idiot. I’m your dinner,” Nattawat says, stealing his lips again.

The combination of their reckless passion and the surge of adrenaline feels like a full-blown apocalypse. A disaster on a universal scale, growing exponentially more dangerous with every second. It’s too hard to keep control, too hard to hold on to common sense, but neither of them even tries. They’re so completely out of their minds that they don’t even register how they make it up to the second floor and into the apartment.

Nattawat shoves the front door open with his palm and starts undressing Norawit on the move, stripping off anything his hands can reach. Norawit keeps up, yanking Nattawat’s jacket and tank top off while kissing him relentlessly, shamelessly. Nattawat’s legs tangle as he stumbles backward down the hallway. They bounce from one wall to another, desperate to find the first suitable surface. The kisses grow dirtier, more frantic, like this is the only thing keeping them alive.

Nattawat pulls the last of the clothes off him, and Norawit kicks them aside. Suddenly, Nattawat jumps into his arms and kisses him like a starving animal that sees no obstacles. Norawit pins him to the wall, accidentally slamming his back into it, and Nattawat lets out a muffled laugh, never stopping his assault on those plush lips. The contrast between the cool surface and Norawit’s burning body sends a shiver through him from head to toe, and he exhales in satisfaction. In the quiet apartment, their ragged breathing and the loud, wet sounds of their kisses echo clearly. The air between them is so charged it’s almost impossible to breathe. It’s pure madness. Unbearable tension. Neither of them is capable of controlling what’s happening. It’s too wild, too uncontrollable.

Nattawat tightens his legs around Norawit’s waist and grips his hair hard, finally forcing them to break the impossibly long kiss. For a few seconds, he just stares into the deep brown pools of his eyes, breathing heavily, practically melting under that scorching gaze. Norawit looks at him with such raw adoration it’s almost frightening. His eyes are wild and hazy, clouded with some sweet intoxication. He looks drunk, even though there isn’t a drop of alcohol in his blood. It’s all emotion. It feels unreal. Is it possible to want someone so badly it hurts? That you can’t breathe? That it twists you up inside? It’s hard to imagine, yet it’s happening to him right now. He hears Norawit’s hoarse, desire-thick breathing as he holds him carefully in his arms. Sees the hunger in his eyes, feels his hot body trembling with the need for more. And he belongs to him completely.

“Over there,” Nattawat whispers, nodding slightly toward the living room.

Without a word, Norawit carries him into the other room and not very gently drops him onto the small couch by the wall, immediately resuming the feverish kisses. His insistent hands roam chaotically over Nattawat’s body, already trembling with impatience, while his lips trail impossibly sweet kisses over skin covered in goosebumps. Long, syrupy moans and broken gasps spill from Nattawat’s lips without his control. Everything is happening so fast that their bodies decide far quicker than their minds. This feels like more than desire, more than passion. There’s no better word for it than lust—raw, sensual craving that can’t be restrained. It makes his head spin, his whole body prickling like it’s been pierced by thousands of tiny needles. The hot air burns his throat, his vision darkens, and Nattawat closes his eyes for a few seconds, trying to steady the world spinning around him.

He gently strokes Norawit's length with his hand, wrapping his legs tightly around his hips, trying to press as close as humanly possible. The heat from his body sears the skin on his arms, legs, and neck, making it a struggle to draw oxygen through parted lips. He squirms impatiently, a sudden cold sweat breaking out on his skin. It's becoming physically unbearable to endure the sensations coursing through him.

Norawit relentlessly and expertly maps out every weak point on his body with lips and tongue, knowing them all by heart. It's as if he could draw an entire atlas of pleasure, marking every spot that makes Nattawat cry out and moan louder than usual. And every single time, he wields that knowledge with devastating skill.

"I think I might suffocate," Nattawat whispers, licking his lips. "I want you this much."

"And I want to tear you apart," Norawit replies, stroking his thigh gently before squeezing it hard. "I never have enough of you, damn it."

The small couch is too cramped for them both, and they constantly shift and writhe, trying to find a comfortable position. Norawit leans slightly to the side and loses his balance. He falls to the floor with a soft groan as his back hits the ground, and Nattawat lets out a foolish laugh before immediately straddling him. Without any further preamble, he begins to smoothly rub his ass against Norawit's hard, wet length, then leans down to kiss the object of his adoration, sliding his tongue deep into his mouth.

His long hair falls on both sides of his face, tickling Norawit's cheeks as he gently rocks back and forth. Norawit tenderly brushes the strands back, clenching his fist at the nape of Nattawat's neck to pull him closer. The fingers of his other hand dig into the hot skin of Nattawat's thigh so forcefully that Nattawat responds with a heavy, unrestrained moan.

His body is already trembling as his patience wears thin, his own length aching with a painful need. He desperately needs all of Norawit right now, unable to wait another damn minute. He reaches for the lube in the bedside table, but Norawit suddenly flips him onto his back, hovering over him on an outstretched arm.

He stares for several seconds at Nattawat's beautiful face, flushed with arousal, unable to suppress a smug grin. He's burning with desire. So turned on that absolutely nothing could

stop him now, not even the damn apocalypse. He looks obsessed, and damn, it's so satisfying to know that he's the object of that obsession.

Norawit can't make him wait any longer; it's too much for both of them. He generously coats his length and fingers with lube, then lightly smacks Nattawat's inner thigh, making him spread his legs wider. Nattawat bites his lip, struggling to suppress a high, raspy moan as Norawit slowly enters him with his fingers. First one, so smooth and unhurried, then a second, carefully increasing the pressure of his thrusts.

Nattawat runs his tongue over his palm, wetting it with saliva, then takes his own length and begins stroking it. He stares intently at Norawit's face, whose wild gaze never leaves him for a moment. Hellfire burns in his large pupils, drowning everything in their depths. So wild they could ignite everything around them. They contain a whirlwind of emotions, and fighting it is impossible, so Nattawat squeezes his eyes shut.

A powerful, inexplicable current rushes through his body like a swift wave, and he collapses onto his fingertips. Another moment, and he could easily come just from touching himself and looking into those eyes. Everything happening between them now is too incredible. He wants to melt and drown in this pleasant sensation, but a sharp slap to his face brings him back to his senses, and he instantly opens his eyes.

"Look at me, how many times do I have to tell you," Norawit orders, drilling him with a gaze darkened by lust.

"Sometimes it's just impossible, baby," Nattawat whispers, closing his eyes again in pleasure, letting out a lingering moan as Norawit rhythmically thrusts his fingers into him. "It's too good, God. You... damn it."

Another slap to his face brings him back, and then Norawit grabs his neck, squeezing until he feels slight suffocation as his lips kiss roughly, stealing every breath. From this powerful grip and mind-shattering desire, everything darkens in Nattawat's vision once again. There isn't enough air, and his entire body fills with an amazing heaviness and tension. He desperately needs to release this cluster of insane energy soon, before he explodes like an atomic bomb from the inside out.

"Are you asking for roughness?" Norawit asks, releasing his throat and entering him with his fingers again.

"Maybe that's what turns me on about you," Nattawat smirks, slowly running his tongue over his lips. "You're so hot when you're angry."

"Do you want me to be rougher with you?"

"I want you to talk less and do more. I can't stand this anymore."

Norawit strokes his length several times quickly, adding more lube, then smoothly and slowly enters him, but almost immediately freezes. The head stretches his walls so pleasurably, but it's too little for Nattawat. He needs all of him, every centimeter that belongs to Norawit. He protests with a moan and easily meets his thrust, only to receive another slap to his face.

"You're misbehaving, Natt," Norawit whispers, squeezing his throat again forcefully.

"Fuck," he breathes out, practically falling apart from everything happening. "Please, Norawit."

"Please what?"

"Stop teasing, fuck me."

"That's what I'm doing, baby," the man smirks, agonizingly slowly penetrating him a few more centimeters.

"No, you're teasing. I need more. Come on, fuck me like you know how," Nattawat pleads, moaning with displeasure as he throws his head back.

"Close your eyes for even half a second," he whispers warningly at his lips before kissing him quickly, "and you'll get a much harder slap on that gorgeous ass of yours."

"A questionable threat," Nattawat smiles. "You know I like it when you don't hold back with me."

With one sharp thrust of his powerful hips, Norawit enters him, and Nattawat cries out, arching his back and grabbing his shoulders. He immediately squeezes his eyes shut and holds his breath for a few seconds, adjusting to the sudden sensation of fullness. It's as if the world around them stops for a moment, the colors growing more vibrant. A wave of wildly hot energy courses through his body, and his consciousness clouds from the sheer overload of emotions. This was exactly what he'd been missing, damn it. They have sex so frequently that he barely needs any preparation anymore; he can easily take him in just by relaxing. It feels as if they were truly made for each other. Can anything be this perfect?

Norawit thrusts into him a few more times, then flips him over, putting him in a knee-elbow position. Nattawat reflexively arches his back in response. Norawit gently spreads his legs slightly apart, then delivers a forceful slap. Nattawat lurches forward from the surprise, sliding on the carpet and gasping for air, and after the sudden blow, several deep, hard thrusts follow, making his lower abdomen clench with a pleasant spasm. He keeps his eyes squeezed shut, suffocating from the overwhelming pleasure and intense pressure as Norawit enters him again and again, knocking the air from his lungs.

"I did warn you," Norawit whispers in his ear, bracing his hands on either side of him.

"You're just awful," Nattawat whispers, clenching his fists and smirking. "Keep going. I love that about you."

In response to these words, Norawit begins to thrust into him faster, actively moving his hips. Nattawat arches his back more and sticks his ass out, easily meeting his movements and intensifying the sensations. It's unbearably deep and impossibly good. So much so that Nattawat is powerless to piece himself back together into something whole and rational. He's as if he's breaking apart into countless tiny particles, letting out tearing moans and cries, transforming into a knot of tense nerves and sparking arousal. Norawit is always absolutely insane—in the best way. In all their time together, Nattawat has long understood that he's a mad lover, but now he seems to have completely lost his mind. Of course, Norawit knows this intensity causes his partner pain, but right now, they both need it.

He straightens up, then abruptly stops and pulls out. Nattawat struggles to breathe, and then receives another hard slap to his ass. So hard that he nearly sees stars.

"Fuck!" he cries out, squeezing his eyes shut. A sharp heat rushes through his body, his cheeks begin to burn, and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end from how pleasurable and painful it is at the same time. His skin burns and instantly begins to sting where Norawit hit him, but for strange reasons, he wants to feel it again. It's insane. It's damn unusual and so sharply intensifies the already incredible emotions that he wouldn't have expected himself to enjoy it this much. His length twitches with tension and has long been aching with arousal, waiting for release.

In stark contrast to all this, Norawit suddenly gently strokes the reddened skin on his buttock and kisses it, then slaps it hard again. So loud and with such a follow-through that the sharp sound instantly cuts through the silence in the room. Nattawat struggles to hold back a scream and only lets out a muffled, heavy moan, closing his eyes. He bites his lip and smiles, awaiting the next move.

Norawit gently kisses his skin along his spine and on his shoulder several times, which is already covered in a sheen of sweat, then runs his tongue over the swollen vein on his hot, tense neck. His tongue slowly slides over his earlobe, and a strong hand lands on his shoulder as he suddenly thrusts forward. Nattawat cries out loudly when he enters him deeply, and he tries not to collapse. Every cell from the top of his head to the tips of his toes fills with an unbearable heaviness, and it becomes so difficult to keep his body under control. It feels as if this sweet torture continues for a few more minutes, he'll simply lose consciousness.

Rhythmic slaps mix with his guttural moans, and this sexual melody echoes off the walls. Norawit is literally impaling him on his length, gripping his waist and shoulder tightly, his hips moving at a frantic pace while his deep breathing rapidly transforms into the growl of a wild animal. Nattawat realizes he can no longer hold his weight on his numb elbows, so he lowers himself onto the rough carpet, sticking his ass up high. With every movement, his body slides against it, rubbing tender areas of skin: his knees, palms, chest. There will probably be scrapes, but right now, he couldn't care less. He barely feels any discomfort, completely focused on the pleasure.

Deep thrusts are periodically punctuated by sharp slaps. Norawit shows him no mercy, taking him roughly without extra words, just as he had asked. And because of this, he's truly just one

tiny step away from coming. It's all too much. He needs to breathe and release this from within him.

Norawit suddenly pulls out and changes their position again, flipping him onto his back. His lips greedily and roughly cover Nattawat's in a wet kiss. His tongue so brazenly and hotly explores Nattawat's mouth that sweat breaks out on his forehead, and his body trembles slightly from the multitude of different sensations. Norawit enters him again and begins to move his hips quickly. His palms, hungry for the other's body, glide smoothly over his slim waist, then over his chest, which heaves in time with their rapid breathing. Then he suddenly grabs his hands, raises them above his head, pressing them to the floor and forcefully holding his wrists.

Nattawat greedily grabs air with his parched lips and completely surrenders himself to the power of this damn hot guy. He loves belonging to him with every cell of his body, but there's a special pleasure in seeing how he revels in it, and watching Norawit rapidly lose control over himself as he continues to penetrate him again and again.

When he accelerates to the limit of his strength, it's as if some cosmic electricity runs through Nattawat's entire body. It runs under his skin, penetrating every vein, then gathers into one large cluster. It rapidly descends into his groin, and with a loud moan, Nattawat comes a few seconds later, convulsively twitching several times.

Norawit releases his hands and runs a ring of fingers over the pulsating head of his length, squeezing out all remaining pleasure. He continues to enter him again and again, approaching his own orgasm, then pulls out. Nattawat immediately props himself up on an elbow and wraps his trembling hand around Norawit's length. He quickly strokes it along its entire length, squeezing the shaft tightly in his fist, while Norawit runs his fingers through his hair and moans in anticipation.

Nattawat watches with fascination as his beloved face contorts in sweet agony, and his body trembles slightly as the first impulses of his approaching orgasm run through him. Damn, he's so beautiful in this moment and impossibly sexual that it takes his breath away.

Norawit hovers over him, propping himself up with a palm on the floor. He parts his lips and breathes heavily, then lowers his eyelids and squeezes them shut. At that moment, Nattawat gives a sly smile and delivers a ringing slap to his face, just as Norawit had done to him a few minutes ago.

This hits him like a bucket of ice water. He opens his eyes, and a deep moan escapes his chest.

"Look at me," Nattawat whispers, a smug grin spreading across his face. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Natt... fuck," Norawit breathes out, his voice low and deep, and in that moment, he comes, his eyes locked on Nattawat's. He spills onto his stomach, freezing for several seconds. He's so breathless he can barely draw air. But despite the obvious exhaustion, he kisses Nattawat's forehead with a care and tenderness that feels like an apology for all his roughness, and this tiny final gesture just breaks his heart.

Nattawat lets out a loud, relieved sigh, then lets his limbs, trembling from the prolonged tension, fall limp. Norawit slowly lies down beside him on the floor, trying to catch his breath. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with his palm and runs his fingers through his damp hair. Nattawat stares at the ceiling, blinking slowly, trying to calm his breathing and the storm of emotions inside him, a silly smile plastered on his face.

His body already aches horribly, feeling leaden and heavy. It's suddenly so difficult to make even the slightest movement that he can barely wiggle his fingers. The skin on his ass stings from the slaps, and his knees are likely carpet-burned. But all of that is so trivial compared to how incredibly satisfied he feels right now. Their mutual passion always brings an impossibly intense pleasure in the end. It's just that this feels like too much. They're too consumed by each other. They want each other too much. Too in love. And neither of them understands if this is good or bad for them both. It's dangerously intense, but stopping what's happening between them is no longer an option.

Norawit wakes a few hours later from a nightmare, jerking awake with a sharp gasp. He had dreamed of that night again—the most terrifying night of his life. The deafening gunshot and his brother’s piercing scream had been the most destructive sounds he had carried with him

for years. They were like levers he was afraid to pull, knowing they would bring all those ugly feelings roaring back to life. It didn't happen often, but sometimes the nightmares came, and every time they did, the fear was overwhelming. As if he were a child again, dragged back into his past. When he woke up, it usually took him a long time to pull himself together, his body and mind left shattered.

But this time felt different.

Strangely enough, despite the nightmare, a light sense of calm filled him. The reason for it was breathing softly against his chest, cheek pressed there, warm and real.

Norawit looks down at the naked body lying beside him and smiles faintly. Nattawat, as always, has sprawled across the entire bed, and partially across him too. Norawit is holding the fingers of Nattawat's right hand, clasping them tightly in his own. It's a silly habit he's had since childhood. Between the ages of five and ten, he'd been terrified of sleeping alone because of imaginary monsters, so sometimes he would crawl into North's bed. He would cling to his fingers, finding comfort in the presence of someone close. The years passed. He no longer feared being alone, and monsters no longer scared him. He had learned to live with them. But he still did this, held onto someone's hand, when he slept in the same bed with another person.

For a few minutes, Norawit gently runs his fingers through Nattawat's dark hair, soaking in this incredible peace. Then he carefully slips out of his arms, trying not to wake him, and heads for the kitchen. Thirst is tormenting him after everything that happened between them. Even though he'd drunk what felt like all the water in the apartment before bed, his mouth is already dry again.

It's still dark outside, so the apartment is wrapped in dim shadows, but everything is visible in the glow of the streetlights filtering through the windows. Norawit moves slowly from room to room, looking around with curiosity—this is his first time here. Nattawat's place feels like the bedroom of a teenager from the 80s or 90s: a kind of grunge style with a retro edge that gives it a unique charm rather than making it feel like junk. They say a home can tell you a lot about its owner. This one radiates ease and comfort, practicality, and a complete lack of concern for other people's opinions. Soft simplicity and restraint, with no space for excessive decor or elaborate finishes. Light carelessness blends perfectly with elegance, and that really is Nattawat in a nutshell. Simple, yet special. He doesn't need to try to stand out—he just does.

In the living room, part of one wall is exposed red brick, as if it had been deliberately left untouched—clearly a clever design choice. And it looks incredibly cool precisely because of how unconventional it is. On the other light-colored walls hang posters of various bands and several vinyl records arranged in two neat rows. The furniture is simple and practical, all the shelves open and filled with everyday items and decor. On one of them, Norawit notices his own gift, along with several small cacti in colorful pots with cute little faces, standing in a row. So cute. Nattawat takes care of the most undemanding plants—just as prickly as he is himself.

In the corner of the room, there's a shapeless gray beanbag chair near a desk cluttered with cardboard boxes full of cassette tapes and stacks of sketch papers. On the floor beside the

desk rests a black acoustic guitar. Everything in this room hums with the energy of someone deeply in love with music. It shows in countless small details, making it clear that this isn't just a passing interest—it's his true passion. It's a shame he can't get a professional education in it. Clearly, Nattawat breathes music just as much as he breathes racing and tattoos.

Suddenly, Norawit hears the muted vibration of a phone and pulls himself away from his thoughts, glancing back. For a few seconds, he searches the hallway floor for his jacket, where he last saw it. Their things are scattered everywhere, chaotically and in a hurry—and they're both to blame for that. He smiles, remembering how they burst in here like animals off a leash.

He finds the phone and grimaces when he sees five missed calls—and the caller's name.

Fuck.

Dawn is only a couple of hours away, which means this person isn't calling for nothing. He wants something, and he's clearly not going to be in a good mood. Just as Norawit is about to call back, Damian rings again. He takes a deep breath, steels himself, and swipes his finger across the screen.

"So," Lim says in an icy tone, "your balls are the size of a planet now, huh?"

Norawit had expected yelling right away—rage, shouting, spit flying everywhere. But apparently, Damian was the kind of person who got angry quietly. And that was so much worse. Quiet anger was far more terrifying than loud fury. The low, calm tone of his voice, carrying a cutting cold, makes Norawit's unease deepen.

"Listen—"

"Not interested. Five calls is a lot. I wasted my time trying to reach you. Disappointing."

"I wasn't ignoring you. I was asleep and didn't hear the phone," Norawit explains.

"I think I get it now," Damian says. "Learn to pull your dick out of your boyfriend on time, Titicharoenrak. Otherwise, I'll talk to you very differently."

"Don't drag him into this, for fuck's sake," Norawit hisses, casting a wary glance toward the bedroom. "If you touch him—"

"Ooh," the man whistles softly, chuckling. "How scary. I almost shit myself."

"Stay away from him. I work for you, and I do what you ask. But if you go near him, I won't tolerate it. This is between you and me, so back off."

"You're head over heels in love, huh?" Lim smirks. "Poor thing. Though I get it. He's cute, bold, confident—and pretty damn hot."

"Shut the fuck up," Norawit growls quietly, gripping the phone so hard his knuckles ache.

“Relax. Destroying Nattawat Jirochtikul isn’t part of my plans, despite his cheeky behavior. Fucking him isn’t either. As long as you suit me, he’s of no interest to me at all. But if problems arise, I’ll have to use him as leverage. Neither of us wants that. Be a good boy.”

“What do you want from me?” Norawit asks.

“I’ve got a job on the verge of falling apart. So I need your driving skills again. I’ll explain the details in person, this isn’t a phone conversation.”

“So what, we rob someone again?”

“No, we’ve already done that,” Lim says with a faint chuckle. “You’ve got an hour. I’m waiting for you downtown, at my office.”

Damian hangs up immediately, not waiting for a response. Short beeps echo in Norawit’s ear.

Bastard.

Norawit exhales heavily, running a hand through his hair and leaning the back of his head against the wall. Anger and despair twist inside him. He has no choice—again.

Now Lim knew about yet another one of his weak points. If Norawit resisted or stepped out of line, Nattawat would become leverage. The last thing he ever wanted was to drag him into this, but it was already too late. No wonder that bastard had looked at him that way in the casino—studying him. Too intently, too openly not to notice. Night barely interested him, but his eyes never left Nattawat. And now it was clear why. He should have been on guard back then.

Norawit quickly grabs his clothes and gets ready to leave. But before he goes, he steps into the bedroom—toward his most precious treasure, the one he would kill Damian Lim for without hesitation.

He sits on the bed and looks at Nattawat. He’s lying almost sideways across the mattress, sprawled on his stomach. His dark hair is a mess, falling into his face, lips slightly parted, one cheek squished from an awkward position. So sweet and soft it makes Norawit want to kiss every inch of his skin. He looks at him with pure adoration, eyes full of love. He brushes a few strands of hair aside and gently trails his fingertips over the back of Nattawat’s neck. Nattawat flinches lightly and lets out a sleepy, protesting groan.

“Why isn’t your pretty ass lying next to me?” he murmurs hoarsely. “I felt you get out of bed.”

“I have to go, baby,” Norawit says, running a hand down his back.

“Is it morning already?”

“Not yet. Go back to sleep.”

“Where are you going in the middle of the night?”

“Business.”

“North?” Nattawat asks, worried, opening his eyes.

“No. Everything’s fine. It’s something else,” Norawit says quietly.

“Can I help somehow?”

“Stay in bed and wait for me. I want to come back to you once I’m done.”

“Okay, babe. Since I didn’t give you a proper dinner, how about breakfast?” Nattawat asks, stretching lazily.

“That sounds amazing,” Norawit smiles, kissing his shoulder a few times.

He brushes his nose against his bare skin, then presses a careful kiss to the back of his head. He breathes in deeply, savoring the most beautiful scent, the one he loves so much, indulging in his own weakness.

“It’s Damian, isn’t it?” Nattawat asks softly, as if afraid of the answer. “He needs something from you again?”

“Yes,” Norawit exhales.

“Don’t go.”

“I can’t, baby.”

“I know. I just want to believe I did everything I could to stop you,” Nattawat whispers, taking a deep breath.

“Sleep. I’ll be back soon.”

“You’ll be okay, right?”

“I’ll do everything I can,” Norawit says, closing his eyes as he kisses Nattawat’s temple.

Chapter 9: IX

Lim Industries was far more than just a well-known company in the city, it was a multi-billion-dollar corporation with countless international partners. It had its own slogan, a recognizable logo, an entire complex of buildings in the heart of Los Angeles, and, most impressively, a colossal tower in Downtown.

The main skyscraper, Limhouse, which bore its owner's surname, housed Damian's central office, the primary production laboratory, and his personal residence perched at the very top of the towering structure.

What must it feel like to live in a building with your name written across it? It surely did wonders for an ego already soaring above the clouds. Rumor had it his apartment occupied the top two floors and had direct access to the roof. Living at your workplace might seem strange, but in Damian's case, it was due to his peak productivity at night. He often mentioned it in interviews, claiming that quick access to his office and lab dramatically increased efficiency. From the outside, though, it looked as if he were hiding from the world inside his enormous fortress—missing only a massive, terrifying dragon to guard it.

Many people wondered how such a young man had managed to build an entire corporation on his own. He was frequently asked that question, and his answers were always vague and evasive. In truth, the explanation was simple: intelligence and smart investments. Basic economic laws applied—the higher the stock value, the more attractive the company became to investors, which meant the flow of money grew year after year as long as he kept inventing. He had powerful financial backing from influential figures. No one knew where his initial startup capital came from, though rumors circulated that one of his early inventions had been purchased when he was still just a schoolboy. Everyone knew Damian was terrifyingly brilliant—a man who designed weapons for the U.S. armed forces.

His primary business was immensely profitable, covering vital industries that constantly demanded innovation and new supplies. On top of that, he ran an extremely lucrative shadow operation. A bastard, but a very rich bastard. The city's residents had no idea that the same man producing weapons for national defense was also selling them just as easily to terrorists. Moreover, he was clearly involved in drug trafficking, deeply rooted in the rougher districts of Los Angeles. That was likely what he meant when he told Han Yaozu he would cut off all supplies. Vermont Vista was known as one of the city's major drug distribution arteries. Damian knew how to make money, and how to multiply it. There was no arguing with that, even if his methods were far from honest.

Limhouse was the tallest building in the city, and it looked breathtaking. An ultra-modern architectural marvel made of reinforced concrete, its massive form was softened by a façade of blue prismatic glass. It was the perfect stylistic choice. At first glance, the skyscraper

resembled the Shanghai Tower—only more striking. What else could one expect from a genius inventor? Naturally, he built something worthy of his colossal ego. Its slightly twisted form and thousands of glass panels set at varying angles made it shimmer under the Californian sun. But at night, like now, it glowed with hundreds of thousands of lights, its peak dissolving into the dark sky.

It was mesmerizing.

Norawit stood at the entrance for nearly a minute, staring at the luminous tower. But time was tight, and the meeting could not wait. Damian had made it clear: everything had to follow his plan, or there would be consequences.

Despite the late hour, the office was still buzzing with activity. People hurried past carrying documents, clearly absorbed in their work. In the lobby, Norawit was met by a stern security guard, who had obviously been instructed to expect him. Without a word, the man led him to the elevator.

The interior of Limhouse did not disappoint, in fact, it stole his breath all over again. The design resembled refined cyberpunk straight out of a top-tier video game. The space combined strict minimalism and cutting-edge modernity, originality and elegance. Decorative elements subtly reminded visitors that they stood at the heart of a headquarters manufacturing military-grade weapons. On the floor where Damian's office was located, an entire wall was covered in awards and letters of gratitude.

Surreal.

So many people thanking him, while he had destroyed twice as many lives.

After a few minutes, the guard stopped in front of a wide black door. Beside it, Damian's name gleamed in gold letters on a polished plaque. It looked outrageously self-indulgent, but when you owned a massive corporation, perhaps you could afford that luxury. The guard gave Norawit a short nod and silently disappeared. He hadn't spoken a single word the entire time, moving with mechanical restraint. Funny, maybe he was one of Lim's inventions.

Behind the door, all was quiet. No footsteps, no voices, but Damian was definitely inside. And it would have been wonderful if he were in a good mood tonight. Though that seemed unlikely, especially after Norawit had ignored five of his calls.

He took a deep breath, cast a wary glance around, and stepped inside, bracing himself for a full-scale assault.

The owner's office matched its master—vast, luxurious, equipped with the finest technology and expensive furniture. Floor-to-ceiling windows occupied one entire wall, revealing a breathtaking panoramic view of Los Angeles from dizzying heights. The style was sleek, corporate, and unlike the rest of the building, dominated almost entirely by black. The lighting was dim, likely due to the late hour, with only hidden illumination in the depths of the room. It lent the space a heavy, ominous atmosphere.

Norawit walked farther in, hearing Damian's calm voice. He found him behind a curved metallic partition and stopped in the doorway, crossing his arms over his chest.

The primary light source in the darkness was a massive glass display, reminiscent of a plasma screen. Damian stood before it. At his side sat the same dog from the warehouse, obedient and alert. Its owner was focused on tapping commands into a touch panel, sliding his fingers across the screen as if sketching something into existence.

"Cast, display the WAB-7 prototype. I need to review the details," Lim said.

"One moment, please. Processing request," came a robotic voice, making Norawit glance around in surprise, searching for its source.

Images immediately shifted across the screen, followed by a loading interface. Seconds later, a schematic blueprint of some kind of advanced weapon appeared, layered with cryptic markings and numbers.

Damian slowly rolled up his sleeves, studying the design intently. A satisfied hum left his lips. He made several annotations directly on the screen with a stylus, and they transformed into a rotating three-dimensional model in a separate window.

Holy shit. This looks unreal. Like a scene straight out of a sci-fi movie, only happening in real life. Norawit stands there, practically slack-jawed in awe, stunned by how advanced modern technology has become. Lim really is a genius, and a fucking playboy with millions in his accounts. No matter how badly he irritates him, Norawit has to admit it's impressive. A sharp mind automatically earns respect. Though Damian has a rare talent for instantly repelling people with his arrogance and cold superiority.

"We need to add reinforced mounting elements. That will significantly increase the output," the man says monotonously, continuing to type. "Why didn't I increase them immediately? It's the logical step for this model."

"An excellent decision, sir," the same strange voice replies. "It appears that with each iteration, you continue expanding the boundaries of your intellectual capacity."

"We should also remove the external detonation control system and integrate it directly into the charge. That way, we'll get an almost perfect weapon. It'll be magnificent."

"A wise solution, sir."

"You should upgrade your system. I haven't updated you in ages, your vocabulary is pitiful," he smirks, slicking his hair back as he critically studies his work.

"I would be grateful," the robot replies.

"I'll deal with you in a couple of days, Cast. Now show me the model with the implemented changes," Lim says, crossing his arms.

The image on the screen shifts, revealing a massive 3D model of a nuclear warhead. Fuck. It's still hard to believe that someone can casually stand in their office at night, creating

weapons capable of erasing entire cities, and thousands of lives. It's terrifyingly impressive. In a way, the fate of humanity rests in his hands. He could drop a bomb and wipe out a city. And he builds this himself. Unreal.

"Looks decent, sir," Cast comments.

"Yes, but not enough. Show me the cross-section."

"One moment, please."

"Now I see it," Lim murmurs, resting his chin on his fingers. "Reduce the number of electrical cables and connectors to the absolute minimum. Control impact should be transmitted pneumatically."

"I will implement these corrections. Anything else?"

"Save the changes and prepare an efficiency analysis by morning. We may need gas boosting. Calculate potential risks. If I like the results, we'll begin implementation."

"Executing task, sir."

The system hums to life, and only then does Damian slowly turn toward his guest. His brows lift in mild surprise. Norawit realizes he should've announced his presence earlier, but he'd been too stunned by everything he'd seen. Damian exhales deeply, studies him with a suspicious squint, checks his watch, then nods approvingly.

"Punctual as always. But learn to answer my calls the first time. I hate waiting," he says calmly.

"Wow," Norawit replies dryly. "And that's it? I thought you'd be ready to kill me."

"Half an hour ago, you would've been dead. You're lucky I started working. When I'm focused, I calm down. Work keeps my excessive emotions in check."

"I can come back later. Looks like I interrupted you, Tony Stark?" Norawit asks.

Damian's lips twitch into an amused smile, deep dimples forming in his cheeks. An unsettlingly charming smile for a villain, but it doesn't change the fact that this man is a deranged killer.

"Genius, billionaire, playboy, but not a philanthropist. Yes, that's me," he smirks. "I'm done for tonight. Your timing is perfect."

"What is that?" Norawit asks, nodding at the screen.

"Outcast. Artificial intelligence. My personal assistant. A system I created capable of replicating human cognitive skills. Cast can plan, solve problems, advise, learn, and evolve during task execution."

"Wow," Norawit mutters. "Impressive."

“Yes. He’s slightly outdated, but still extremely capable. I spend a lot of time with him, so you could say he’s my best friend and right hand combined.”

“What exactly can he do?” Norawit asks, stepping closer.

“And why does that interest you?” Damian counters.

“I’m terrible with modern tech. Seeing this is like walking into the Avengers’ headquarters.”

“Cast. Keyword: Norawit Titicharoenrak,” Damian orders.

“Executing,” the robot replies.

Windows flicker across the screen. Files open, data compiles. Then Norawit’s photo appears, along with a concise dossier.

Holy shit.

“That’s all I could retrieve, sir.”

“He processes data submitted by you or others into public and private systems. A photo your friend uploaded to Facebook five years ago. Your bank card data. Medical insurance records. Not everything, but plenty.”

“Damn,” Norawit whispers, half awed.

“Yes. I truly am a genius,” Damian says smugly.

“Careful,” Norawit replies, lifting his gaze. “Main villains always fall because of arrogance.”

“I’m flattered you think I’m the main villain. But reality is deeper than you imagine.”

“What do you mean?”

“Villains always have reasons, don’t they?” Damian muses. “Power. Money. Genocide. Madness. But behind reasons, there are origins. Something that turns good people bad. No one is born a villain, Titicharoenrak.”

“Trying to justify your asshole personality?” Norawit laughs quietly. “Doesn’t work.”

“I never justify myself. It’s simple, I am a villain. A smart one with twisted brains,” Damian shrugs, patting his shoulder.

Self-aware. Honest. And terrifying. Intelligent monsters are the most dangerous of all.

“I gave you time to think,” Damian says. “About Powerslide.”

“You mean the race?”

“Yes. I need your answer now. Are you ready to do anything to win?”

“If I win, you’ll leave us alone?”

“Did I promise that?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will. I keep my word.”

“And you’ll stop blackmailing my brother? Fires, drugs, debts, all that shit?”

“I’ll release both of you. No more problems.”

“Then I’m in.”

“Already training?”

“Sort of. I need to leave the city for a while.”

Damian’s icy gaze sharpens.

“For the race,” Norawit adds quickly. “Someone’s going to teach me drift techniques outside the city. I need an edge.”

“Someone,” Damian murmurs. “Let me guess, Nattawat Jirochtikul. The undisputed king of the Loop. Winner of Osaka. The legendary dragon.”

“Swear to God if—”

“Shh.” Damian waves him off. “Relax. Killing him isn’t in my plans. I just like knowing everything.”

“Don’t touch him.”

“Fine. Go,” Damian nods. “After today’s job, I’ll give you time to prepare. But when you return, I want proof you weren’t just vacationing with your cute boyfriend.”

“Like I have a choice,” Norawit exhales. “Why am I here today?”

“I need your riding skills again. You’re the best biker in the city. Impressive, really.”

“So I’m stealing again?”

“No. You’ll escort and distract.”

“Distract who?”

“Police.”

“The fuck?”

“Relax. They’re focused on me. I need to move a truck tonight. If they stop it, no amount of money will save me.”

“What’s in it?”

“Less you know, better.”

Damian sets a black-tinted helmet on the desk.

“It’s rigged with a transmitter. You’ll hear police comms. Be smart.”

“And if I get caught?”

“You’ll be detained. Don’t panic. I’ll clean it up.”

“Your services are expensive.”

“Then don’t get caught,” Damian smirks. “Come. I’ll show you what you’re riding. Your bike won’t do.”

After taking a private elevator down to the underground level and passing through several corridors, Norawit finds himself with Damian in a massive subterranean parking complex. They descend a metal staircase, and Norawit lets out an awed whistle, stopping midway down.

From here, an enormous hangar-like space opens up before him, transformed into a luxury garage. His eyes scatter in every direction, overwhelmed by the sight. Probably the most expensive and elite cars from all over the world stand here in three flawless rows. One is filled with sports cars, another with SUVs and hatchbacks. Audi, Ferrari, Mercedes, Porsche —every iconic brand, every model brutal in power and prestige. Most of them are black or silver, but a few racing cars in vivid, flashy colors catch the eye instantly.

The entire scene looks unreal. Like a high-end showroom filled with polished, glittering toys you’re almost afraid to touch. Anyone who cares even slightly about speed and cars would feel this sight hit straight in the chest.

“Not a bad collection you’ve got here,” Norawit says with a smirk, inspecting the pristine machines.

“Cars are one of the best financial investments,” Damian replies, stopping on the steps and glancing back at him. “They say shopping relieves stress. This works for me. Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I buy a new car.”

“What, does everyone here earn fifty of these a month?” Norawit scoffs.

“And why would you think that?”

“Because you’d have to work your ass off to afford even one of these beauties. I know my cars.”

“True. They’re expensive. But when your name is on the Forbes list, you don’t really worry about it.”

“Of course,” Titicharoenrak rolls his eyes. “You’re a billionaire. So how many of these are yours?”

“All of them,” Lim shrugs smugly.

“All of them? You’re kidding,” Norawit stares.

“This is my private garage. So yes. They’re all mine.”

“Holy shit. Don’t tell me you’ve got a private jet too.”

“Fine. I won’t.”

Damian chuckles quietly and continues down the stairs. Of course he does. It would be more surprising if he didn’t have an entire airline.

“You’ll be racing one of these.”

“Me? In one of these?” Norawit asks in disbelief.

“Yeah. You need a good car for Powerslide. I’ll provide it.”

“And then you’ll bill me if I scratch it? No thanks. I’ll find my own,” Norawit shakes his head.

“After your little countryside drive, you’ll show me your improved skills. I’ll come watch you at the track sometime. Impress me, and one of these beauties is yours.”

“Mine? As in…?”

“I’ll give it to you.”

“Impressive generosity. What’s the catch?”

“It’s not generosity. It’s investment. You and the car are assets I’m putting into a profitable venture. If you don’t disappoint me, I’ll earn more than enough to cover even a wrecked vehicle.”

“How much are you betting on me?”

“All my expectations. And I hope you’re worth it, Norawit Titicharoenrak.”

As they pass along the row of cars, Norawit notices a tinted truck deeper in the garage, the one he’ll likely be escorting. People move around it, securing the rear doors, preparing for departure. Dawn is breaking, which means the roads will soon flood with traffic. Probably why Damian chose motorcycles for the escort—mobility, agility, efficiency. Damn strategist. Always thinking several steps ahead.

They approach the massive sliding exit doors. With a low mechanical hum, they slowly lift. Norawit squints against the glare of headlights and raises a hand to shield his eyes.

Five bikers wait outside.

So this is his backup.

Five riders clad in leather, fully geared for aggressive riding, sit astride sleek sport bikes, engines idling. Each jacket bears a digital marking—callsigns, probably for internal communication—and their helmets match the one in Norawit's hand.

"Meet your team for today," Damian says, lightly tapping the helmet. "The numbers match their callsigns. They'll move in formation behind and beside you. You'll assign positions through comms. Start slow and clean. No unnecessary chaos. If cops get on your tail, then you improvise. But you're no stranger to that. You handled it perfectly last time."

"I will," Norawit replies, exhaling deeply.

"Good. Protect my cargo. And here's your baby." Damian nods toward a motorcycle by the wall, handing him the key. "Take care of it. And don't kill yourself. I'll find you even in the afterlife, Norawit Titicharoenrak."

He winks, pats Norawit's shoulder, and steps back. A glance at his expensive watch, then a sharp gesture signaling the start. In the next moment, Damian disappears around the corner, undoubtedly off to continue his dark affairs.

Norawit approaches the motorcycle and whistles softly.

He runs his palm over the leather seat, smiling faintly. Elegant curves. Smooth lines. If popularity measured quality, this beauty would have no rivals. He knows this model well, every technical detail burned into memory. This isn't just transportation. It's a jewel among machines.

The engine responds instantly to throttle, sharp and precise. Speed builds dynamically, restrained only by a limiter. Its flexibility is phenomenal, with a powerful low-end torque. With the right touch, even tight turns are manageable in third gear, and if anything goes wrong, flawless maneuverability and a skilled rider can save the situation.

But this machine demands respect.

It's sensitive. No harsh handling. It requires a different approach than his own bike. Luckily, Norawit knows how to work with different temperaments.

He mounts the bike, adjusting to the unfamiliar weight. Muscle memory awakens. Helmet on. Visor down.

A system activates.

"Gemini, welcome," a male voice echoes in his ears. Norawit arches a brow. Advanced tech, damn. "We're ready to roll. Total operation time: thirty minutes. Call me First. I'll stay on

your left."

"Copy," Norawit replies, testing the levers and settling in.

"If you were chosen as lead, I assume you can handle command. Awaiting instructions."

"We move out. You and I in front. Others stay behind the truck, but don't crowd it."

"Understood."

One of the bikers taps his helmet in salute.

Norawit signals the truck driver. The older man activates his earpiece and nods. After a brief pause, the engine rumbles to life, and the truck slowly rolls forward.

Norawit still doesn't fully understand why Damian put him in charge. These riders are clearly professionals. So why him? Was there an ulterior motive? A setup? Or was this just another way of asserting control, reminding Norawit who pulls the strings?

He forces the nervous tension down. On the road, instincts sharpen instantly. Emotions lock under control. This bike feels different—wild, restrained, dangerous. From one stoplight to the next, it's like holding a predator by a short leash.

The truck moves steadily through the awakening city. Traffic thickens. The bikers surround it like they're escorting nuclear codes or the entirety of Lim's fortune. Every pair of eyes scans relentlessly.

One question gnaws at Norawit.

Why would Damian move so openly if the cops are hunting him? Wouldn't it be smarter to transport his valuables quietly, in fragments, unnoticed? Instead, he sends out a heavily guarded convoy, like bait.

Strange. Very strange.

But then again, this is the local Tony Stark.

And God only knows what kind of madness runs through that man's mind.

They all come to a smooth stop at the next traffic light, and Titicharoenrak cautiously checks his mirrors, scanning every car around them. There are no police cruisers with flashing lights in sight, but that would be far too obvious. They've only just started moving. Most likely, the cops are already nearby, trying to figure out exactly where the cargo is headed.

A soft click sounds in Norawit's ear, followed by static, as if someone is speaking through a radio.

"The guy in the black jacket with the print, on the right side of the target, looks suspicious. Keeps looking around. Think he noticed us?"

“No, I don’t think so. We’re keeping a safe distance. Continue tailing. Move a little closer, but not too much.”

“Copy.”

Another click, and the transmission ends.

Cops.

Lim warned them that the police would be monitoring their frequency. And apparently, they’re talking about him. Is he really that obvious? Norawit curses under his breath and carefully glances into the side mirror, scanning the lines of cars behind them.

Nothing stands out, until he notices a dull black Mercedes switching on its turn signal, waiting to change lanes. Right after the cops said they should move in closer.

Inside is a man in his early thirties who looks painfully like a cop. Buzz cut. Hard face. Too businesslike. Too alert. And his eyes are fixed straight on the truck.

Norawit is almost certain he’s found one.

“First, you hear that?” he asks.

“Yeah. They’re tailing you. Spot anyone?” comes the reply.

“Think so. Left lane. Old black Mercedes. Suspicious guy inside.”

“Copy. Four cars back in the same lane, silver Audi. Definitely a cop. You can read it all over his face.”

“You sure?” Norawit asks, searching for the car.

“Yeah.”

“How many of them do you think there are?”

“Hell if I know. If they sent everyone, maybe all five units. Lim’s a big fish. They could be setting up a full show just for him. These guys are undercover, uniformed units should be waiting somewhere ahead.”

“Shit. Our priority is the cargo. We react as problems come.”

“Copy.”

Traffic finally begins to move again, and they roll forward. Norawit keeps close watch on the two suspicious cars, his nerves tightening by the second. They’re careful, but unmistakably following.

So they really did find at least two.

Fuck.

If this job goes wrong, none of them will keep their heads. If the cargo really is that valuable, the cost will be pinned on all of them. And if Damian gets arrested, they're completely done, every single one of them. Accessories. Witnesses. Targets.

"Hey, Gemini, car to your right. Blue Porsche, older model. Riding your ass," someone warns.

"Copy. Is it just me, or are they boxing us in?"

"Not just you. They're closing in from all sides."

"I see another one up ahead," the truck driver adds. "You're right. They're surrounding us."

"Got it," Norawit says. "Form up around the truck. We take the front. Second and Fourth—flanks. Two more behind. We're speeding up, but keep it clean. No panic."

"Copy."

The bikers quickly fall into formation, surrounding the truck in a tight defensive ring. The suspicious cars suddenly begin changing lanes chaotically as traffic thins. They're trying to break their formation, but it's already too late.

"They noticed," a federal agent mutters over the radio.

"Yeah. Shield formation. Damn it."

"Execute. Units on Sunset Boulevard, stand by. We're funneling them there. Intercept team takes over."

The police cars gradually tighten their grip, trying to herd them into a trap. They've set the stage carefully, unaware that Lim's team can hear every word.

"All units, readiness one. Firearms authorized if necessary."

"At the light, we turn right. They won't let us slip away quietly," Norawit says.

"Copy."

"Units standing by. Weapons ready."

"Weapons? What the—"

Norawit doesn't get to finish.

Two police cruisers burst from around the corner, sirens screaming.

Interception. Right here. On a busy street.

Fuck.

Everything that follows feels unreal. His body moves on instinct alone. Protect the truck. That's the only thought in his head. But what truly terrifies him isn't death, it's Damian's wrath. And the threats he might unleash on Nattawat.

His hands act automatically. His legs go numb. His mind fires off rapid decisions, sharp and brutal. Somehow, he doesn't crash when the cops make their sudden move. He holds his line, even as his focus wavers.

The truck surges forward, blasting through a red light, pushing for distance. Miraculously, they avoid collisions, cars scatter at the sound of sirens and reckless speed. Someone shouts through a megaphone, but Norawit can't make out the words. Probably ordering them to pull over.

Not today.

Today, he just has to protect the damn truck, and himself.

The cops don't fall back. Their priority is the cargo, but they're not about to let the bikers go either. To them, these guys are accomplices. Key witnesses. Potential leverage against Damian.

What if he just turned him in?

Confessed everything—blackmail, the fire, the drugs, the murder.

Who would believe him without proof?

No one.

And he can't risk it. Because then North or Nattawat would pay the price.

God. Anyone but him.

They weave through the streets, barely staying ahead. Five police cars on their tail. A trap waiting somewhere ahead. Obstacles everywhere. One mistake and they're all dead.

Panic grows exponentially.

Norawit doesn't think, he reacts. Giving rapid commands. Dodging. Maneuvering. Fighting the tightening grip around his throat.

Until they swing onto another intersection and instantly realize, without a single word, that it's over.

A massive traffic jam.

The truck won't get through. And trying to turn around will cost precious seconds.

"Fuck!" First yells. "What do we do?!"

They slow sharply, closing in on the dead end. Norawit's mind spirals. He can already imagine what Damian will do to him if he loses this cargo.

There's no way out.

No escape routes.

Either push through the jam—impossible.

Or stop—and fail.

"To hell with this! Run! They'll catch us!" someone screams.

"No!" Norawit shouts. "You can't abandon the truck! They'll kill us faster than you can breathe! Are you insane?!"

"Then what do we do?!"

"Scatter. Now. Get out," Damian's voice suddenly cuts in.

Every biker freezes.

Shit. He's been listening the whole time.

"What? But—"

"Move! Now! Warehouse. Don't make me repeat myself!"

The truck slams to a halt, boxed in by traffic. Its fate is sealed.

But in the chaos, the cops lose track of the escort. The bikers drop speed, slip between cars, vanish into the jam.

For a moment, it seems like they've made it.

Then the ambush appears.

Two police cars block the road ahead. Officers step out, guns raised.

No. No. No.

The bikers scatter instinctively, survival taking over.

Norawit jerks right and guns it.

Industrial zone. Straight toward Vermont Vista. Toward the warehouse.

For a heartbeat, freedom feels close. Too close.

And then—

A minute later, as he rounds another bend, he suddenly hears the roar of an engine, and then a car appears right behind him. It's the same blue one that had been tailing him at the traffic light. Looks like the guy isn't planning to let him go that easily.

Titicharoenrak twists the throttle, and the engine answers with a deep, predatory growl. No car should be able to catch a bike like this. He just needs to gain a little distance and hit a straight stretch, then he won't have to brake so hard through every turn. Better yet, he can disappear somewhere among the warehouses.

But the blue car sticks to him relentlessly, and whoever's behind the wheel clearly knows how to drive. Really well.

What is this, some damn Brian O'Conner wannabe?

"Didn't think they taught this kind of driving at the police academy," Titicharoenrak mutters, easing off the throttle again.

His plans collapse the moment he tries to take the next turn.

The bike suddenly stops obeying him, or maybe it's his own body that fails. His hands can't keep hold of the trembling handlebars, the weight of the machine feels wrong, unbearably heavy. His speed drops fast, control slipping through his fingers.

A few gunshots crack through the air, fired as a warning, and for a split second he loses focus.

One second is all it takes.

Panic, buried fears, and shock collide.

The bike tilts, sliding sideways, and then everything crashes into the asphalt. He curls instinctively as his body skids across the road, while the motorcycle spins away in the opposite direction.

For several seconds, there's only ringing in his ears and darkness before his eyes. Pain tears through his body, but it's tolerable. Thank God for the helmet. Without it, his brain would have been smeared across the pavement.

He doesn't try to move. He just lies there, breathing shallowly, assessing himself.

Doctors always ask patients to rate their pain on a scale of ten. He never gives a ten. He believes anything can be endured.

The only time he ever gave a nine was when he lost his parents.

That had been a solid nine.

And even that, somehow, he survived.

This?

This is barely a three.

He slowly lifts a hand and opens the visor, dragging in air. His chest burns with every breath, pain locking his lungs halfway. His back and shoulder throb from the impact, but he got lucky. He slowed down just enough before the fall.

“Hey. You alive?” a man’s voice asks nearby.

He feels careful hands checking his limbs.

“Seems like it,” he murmurs.

“Arms, legs, neck—everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You can move?”

“I think so.”

“How bad does it hurt?”

“Three.”

“Dizzy?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Good,” the cop says, pulling out handcuffs. “Because you’re under arrest.”

“For what, for fuck’s sake?” Titicharoenrak scoffs, then winces as pain spikes.

“You work for Lim.”

“As if I had a choice,” Norawit whispers as the officer helps him sit up.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Arrested means arrested,” he says quietly, remembering the transmitter in his helmet, and the fact that Damian might be hearing every word.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—”

A muted gunshot slices through the air.

The officer collapses lifelessly, never finishing the sentence, never closing the cuffs around Titicharoenrak’s wrists.

Norawit flinches violently, pain and fury knotting inside his chest.

Again.

Another death. Another gunshot. Another body falling in front of him.

He wants to scream, but all that escapes is a broken, hoarse breath.

He slowly removes his helmet, squeezing his eyes shut when he sees the blood pooling beside the fallen cop.

Lim stands nearby, gun lowered.

Everything inside Norawit twists. Memories crash back—screams, shots, his brother's cry. And once again, he's powerless. All he can do is stare as blood trickles down the officer's temple.

"Why?" he whispers. His eyes burn, tears blurring his vision. "Why did you do that? You could've just knocked him out. Why kill again? What kind of monster are you?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Norawit," Damian says coolly, and the sound of his name makes Norawit shudder. "But there's never been anything good in me. And there never will be."

"Why? How can you be this cruel? Is there nothing human left in you?"

"No."

"Didn't anyone ever teach you about good and evil? That cruelty only breeds more cruelty?"

Damian stares ahead for a moment, then slowly shakes his head.

"The only thing I was taught as a child was how to survive. And to survive, I had to be strong. And alone. I was nothing but a resource—smart, useful, expendable. No one cared about me."

"Does a human life really mean nothing to you?" Titicharoenrak whispers. "Not even one?"

Damian sighs and crouches in front of him, studying his face. For a second, something like regret flickers in his eyes, then vanishes.

"Even my own life has no value. This was necessity. He hunted me. I hunted him. Natural selection. I was simply stronger. Smarter."

He rises. "Let's go. This place isn't as deserted as it looks."

"I failed. Just kill me already. Why drag this out?"

"Hit your head, did you?" Damian scoffs, gripping his chin to examine him. "Use that brain of yours, Titicharoenrak."

Norawit frowns, replaying everything in his head.

“Wait…” he whispers. “You’re way too calm for someone whose truck just got seized. Which means…”

“It was empty,” Damian smiles. “Exactly.”

“What the hell?”

“You were a decoy. So was the truck. The real shipment left the garage in a postal van with an old man behind the wheel. You saw him.”

“I think so…”

“That carried my cargo. Already safe in the warehouse.”

“Drugs?”

“Of course. Distribution starts tonight. And you helped me pull it off. You’re impressive.”

“You planned all of this in advance.”

“Naturally. And you helped eliminate an obstacle.” He nods toward the corpse.

“You’re one hell of a twisted bastard.”

“Yes. A brilliant one.” He smirks.

“Where are the others?”

“Those who ran are probably dead. The rest got paid. As for you, you lived because you protected the cargo. Loyalty matters to me.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“May I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Why did you risk your life like that?”

Norawit exhales slowly. “Because you’re my problem. You’ll always find leverage. I can’t run from you.”

“Because of him, right?” Damian murmurs.

“Don’t touch him,” Norawit snaps. “You’ve already ruined my brother’s life.”

“Relax. I won’t. But love makes you weak, Titicharoenrak. It’s the most dangerous weapon nature ever created.”

“I protect what I love. That’s what makes us human.”

Damian studies him for a long moment, then releases his shoulder.

“Go to your boyfriend. Rest while you can.”

He turns and walks away.

Norawit exhales shakily.

Damian Lim is the strangest man he has ever met, terrifying and calming in the same breath. A walking contradiction. And whatever darkness lives inside him… it’s something far worse than Norawit can imagine.

Phuwin arrived barely ten minutes after Norawit’s call. He picked up his bike from Limhouse and drove him straight to Nattawat’s place. The entire ride, he kept throwing worried glances at Norawit, offering every five minutes to take him to the hospital, but Norawit refused each time. It wasn’t that serious. A few bruises and scrapes didn’t deserve that much attention.

“Let me at least walk you up to your apartment. You’re pale like I am after a brutal hangover,” Tangsakyuen insisted.

“Cypher, go to hell,” Titicharoenrak smirked, then winced. “Someone’s waiting for me in there, and you’ll just be in the way. I’m fine, just a couple of scratches and bruises.”

“Alright. Go carefully, please. I’ll get your bike home safe and sound.”

“Thanks, Phu. You know how much that—”

“Yeah, I know. And I love you,” he nodded. “Now go. Romeo’s waiting.”

Every step was a struggle. His body ached, his head swam slightly, and exhaustion weighed heavily in his limbs. These days, Norawit rarely crashed or wiped out, he was skilled enough to stay in control, but sometimes luck simply turned its back on him. And he’d almost forgotten just how much it hurt.

He opened the familiar door, which turned out to be unlocked, and the scent of fresh food instantly filled his lungs. Nattawat really was making breakfast, just like he’d promised. The smell was so good it made his stomach twist with anticipation. The TV murmured softly in the living room, and the clink of dishes and running water came from the kitchen.

God, it felt incredible to return to a place where someone was waiting for you. Where someone cared. Where they would feed you, hold you, and tell you that today was just a bad day and tomorrow would be better. That, in Norawit's understanding, was what "home" meant. Not a place, not an apartment, not a city or a country. Home was a person. His quiet harbor. His safe haven.

He slowly slipped off his jacket, careful not to brush the raw skin on his palms, then took a few steps forward, bracing his forearm against the wall. He bent to take off his shoes, but a sharp pain shot through his side, making him jerk. His elbow hit a stack of boxes on the dresser, and they crashed to the floor.

"Norawit?" came Nattawat's soft voice from the other room. "You're back?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I'll put everything back," he answered.

"What are you doing—" Nattawat stepped out of the kitchen and froze. The smile vanished from his face as his eyes swept over Norawit's body. "Fuck. Come here. Carefully."

He gently helped him take off his shoes, but Norawit swayed, nearly falling. Nattawat caught him and carefully lowered him to the floor by the wall. He cupped Norawit's face in his hands, exhaling shakily as he studied every inch of his skin.

Norawit watched the panic and tenderness flicker in those familiar eyes and felt warmth flood his chest. An entire ocean of love and fear lived in that gaze. Nattawat looked impossibly soft like this—loose sweatpants, an oversized T-shirt, hair messy. Norawit wanted to wrap him in his arms, breathe him in, and finally feel safe. That was all he needed right now. All the pain would fade because of him. The ache inside hurt far more than the bruises.

"Baby," Nattawat whispered, frowning painfully. "What happened? What did he do to you?"

"It was an accident."

"Don't lie to me. I'll kill him if he touched you," Nattawat said seriously, inspecting the scrapes on his hands.

"It really was an accident."

"How do you feel?"

"Like I fell off a motorcycle," Norawit muttered, closing his eyes tiredly.

"I'm calling a doctor," Nattawat said, rising, but Norawit caught his wrist.

"Don't. I only need you right now. No doctor can help with what hurts."

"But you could have internal injuries—"

"The only thing that can heal what's hurting is you," Norawit whispered, looking at him with such raw pain that Nattawat's chest tightened. "I don't want to see anyone else."

Nattawat exhaled heavily, shrinking inward at those words. They were tender, but they hurt. He understood immediately, Norawit had witnessed violence again, something cruel and senseless that kept breaking him piece by piece. Damian had done something, forced him into something again.

Nattawat wrapped his arms around his shoulders and kissed his hair. Norawit clung to him like a frightened child, as if Nattawat were the only thing anchoring him to this world.

“Okay,” Nattawat whispered. “No one else. Just you and me.”

“Thank you.”

“Come on. Let me at least clean your wounds.”

He helped him onto the edge of the couch, grabbed the first-aid kit, and knelt in front of him, gently cleaning the raw skin on his palms. Norawit hissed and sucked in a breath through clenched teeth.

“Ow—!”

“Oh hush,” Nattawat teased softly, blowing on his hand. “You’re acting like a kid. Didn’t you scrape your knees growing up?”

“It still hurts,” Norawit muttered, pouting.

He was so unbearably cute that Nattawat couldn’t help smiling.

“Tell me what happened,” he said quietly. “How did you manage to fall? I thought you rode better than you walked.”

“I wasn’t on my bike. Lim gave me another one. It was heavier. I think I misjudged the turn.”

“Lim gave you another one?” Nattawat asked suspiciously.

“For a job.”

“Yeah, I already hate that,” Nattawat murmured.

“Surprisingly, I finished it,” Norawit exhaled.

“And what exactly was the job?”

“We were bait for the cops.”

“What? Why?”

“Someone was digging into him. While we distracted the police, he moved a shipment of drugs out of his tower,” Norawit said, nodding at the TV.

Nattawat turned up the volume. The news anchor spoke about an early-morning police chase, a dangerous operation, one officer killed, and traffic suspended across several streets.

“Oh God,” Nattawat whispered. “You saw him die, didn’t you?”

“Damian shot him. Right in front of me. He was trying to arrest me after I crashed.”

“Fuck…” Nattawat breathed. “You went through that again.”

“That’s why I only want you right now,” Norawit said hollowly. “You’re my link to reality when everything starts closing in. You’re my safety belt. You keep me from falling.”

“Hey, baby. We’ll get through this,” Nattawat murmured, pulling him into his arms. “We will.”

“If he ever hurts you, I’ll never forgive myself. Never.”

“He won’t,” Nattawat whispered, stroking his hair. “And if he tries, we’ll deal with it. Together.”

“I’m scared he’ll use you against me.”

“He won’t. And if he does, he’ll regret it.”

Norawit cupped his face gently. “Promise me you’ll be careful. No reckless moves.”

“I promise.”

“Because… you’re mine,” Norawit whispered.

Because I love you, he thought, but didn’t say it aloud. Some words were too fragile, too sacred. Not yet.

“I waited too long to find you,” he murmured, kissing him softly. “I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t,” Nattawat said with a faint smile. “Nothing can break us apart. Except maybe Jumu.”

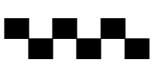
Norawit snorted quietly.

“Let’s leave,” Nattawat suddenly said.

“Far away?”

“Yeah. Ojai. Just for a while. Nature, silence, friends. No Damian. Just us.”

“That sounds perfect,” Norawit whispered, hugging him tightly.



Ojai lay about a hundred and ten kilometers northwest of Los Angeles, and the road leading there was unbelievably scenic—pleasant in that quiet, almost nostalgic way. The highway was half-empty, and along the way they passed charming little provincial towns and stretches of natural beauty that begged to be captured on camera and kept forever. From the car window, the Pacific Ocean unfolded in breathtaking views: towering cliffs, winding capes, and lookout points perched high above the water.

The whole trip felt like a family road journey. The Mustang cruised along at a steady, comfortable speed, occasionally overtaking other cars. Nattawat sat behind the wheel, happily bobbing his head to the upbeat music filling the cabin. His movements were loose and relaxed, his mood so light it felt as if he were heading off on a real vacation—somewhere like Hawaii.

He turns the volume up and starts singing along to the familiar song, swaying slightly as he does, while Norawit watches him with open fascination and laughs. Nattawat looks devastatingly beautiful in this moment. The warm wind from the half-open window ruffles his dark hair and sweeps it back, while the bright California sun kisses his glowing skin as it slowly drifts toward the horizon. The muscles in his arms tense with every movement, and each flex sends an unexpected wave of sharp arousal straight through Norawit, sitting beside him. And that smile, so effortlessly charming, triggers an overwhelming rush of tenderness. As always, no middle ground. One extreme to the other.

It's hard to believe a treasure like this somehow ended up being his.

Without breaking his little concert, Nattawat adjusts his purple-tinted sunglasses with a light flick of his finger and turns his head toward his passenger. His lips curve into an almost smug grin.

"Why are you staring like that?"

"I can't stop looking at you," Norawit answers, smiling like a lovestruck idiot and tilting his head.

"Lucky you, huh?" Nattawat says, rolling his shoulders and head again in a simple dance. "Never thought my first boyfriend would be so handsome I'd be jealous of myself."

"Wait—your first?" Norawit raises a brow. "Weren't you the one who was going to take my virginity? Remember?"

"Let's skip the details."

Nattawat laughs softly and takes a few sips of soda through a straw from his oversized cup, his lips adorably pursed.

"So tell me," he says. "Was there anyone else?"

“If I start listing everyone, we’ll be here all day,” Norawit replies. “I was… pretty affectionate in high school.”

“Stop. I’m serious. Tell me about real relationships.”

“Real relationships?” Norawit repeats thoughtfully, frowning. “No. I always thought I was too complicated to belong to someone. You know how difficult I can be. That’s why I was always on my own.”

“But you practically begged me to date you,” Nattawat laughs again. “Did I really impress you that much at first sight?”

“When was that?” Norawit asks, genuinely surprised.

“Not that long ago.”

“That never happened,” he snorts.

“It did,” Nattawat nods.

“Get lost. No.”

“‘Just say it once. That’s all I need,’” Nattawat mimics dramatically.

“Hey, I didn’t force you,” Norawit rolls his eyes.

“You literally pressured me into saying I was your boyfriend. You looked so pathetic I couldn’t withstand it.”

“So you’re dating me out of pity?” Norawit laughs.

“No. It’s just that your dick isn’t the size of a pinky. I found that very satisfying and agreed,” Nattawat shoots back, repeating his words.

Norawit bursts into laughter, throwing his head back, and Nattawat grins wide. That sound always makes something warm and pleasant stir in his chest, every single time, like the first.

“God, you’re so—”

“Hm?” Nattawat responds, pushing his aviators down to the bridge of his nose and wiggling his eyebrows.

“I’m hopelessly in love,” Norawit groans, sinking back into the seat and running a hand through his hair. “One look into your eyes and I’m ready to hand you the entire planet. You really shouldn’t exploit my weaknesses like this.”

“Stop whining, baby,” Nattawat laughs and winks. “I’m in love with your eyes too.”

A long honk sounds behind them, and they both glance at the side mirrors. A dark green Skyline pulls up fast, flashing its headlights before settling right behind them. Phuwin and

Pahn must be together in that car. Perfect. Now they just need the rest.

“How much longer?” Norawit asks.

“Twenty minutes max and we’ll be in town. Are you tired? Feeling bad? Want to stop?” Nattawat asks, worry creeping into his voice as he glances over.

“No, I’m fine. Just curious,” Norawit says, smiling sweetly.

“Anything still hurting? Do you need something?”

“Don’t fuss so much, baby. The bruises ache a bit, but it’s nothing serious.”

“I can’t not worry. You fell off a motorcycle.”

“You’re so caring. But really, I’m okay.”

“I won’t relax until you’re completely fine.”

“I like how worried you get about me,” Norawit says, studying his profile.

“I can’t help it. You’re mine,” Nattawat replies, taking his hand and placing it on his thigh.

Fireworks explode in Norawit’s chest, just like that evening in Santa Monica on their date. Hearing that from him feels intoxicating. It sounds possessive, but in the most beautiful way. He doesn’t mind belonging to Nattawat at all. Not even a little.

Every day, Nattawat sinks deeper into his soul, wraps his hands around his heart. He becomes part of his DNA, burrowing so deeply inside him that life without this person feels physically impossible.

Nothing Norawit has ever felt compares to this. It’s a volatile mix of passion, reverence, care, and tenderness. The desire to possess him completely—to have every minute of his time, even the air he breathes. The need to touch him, to breathe in kisses with him, borders on unbearable. Every cell in his body aches when they’re apart. And while he loves these feelings… they terrify him just as much.

Another honk pulls him from his thoughts. In the mirror, an Aston Martin speeds along the neighboring lane, catching up quickly. Night must have picked up North after wrapping things up at the club—his own insistence, by the way. Insane to think these two might actually like each other. They deny it, refuse to say it out loud, but it’s painfully obvious to everyone else. Jirochtikul the younger is just scared of scaring him off. You need a special approach with him—Norawit knows that better than anyone. For now, he’s doing fine.

Nattawat’s phone rings through the speakers, and he presses the button on the wheel, glancing toward Phuwin’s Skyline pulling up on their right. Pahn winks from the passenger seat, laughing at something Tangsakyuen said.

“Hey there, NorNatt babies,” their friend’s voice fills the car.

“Who?” Nattawat asks.

“What does that even mean?” Norawit laughs.

“It’s Norawit plus Nattawat, you fossils,” the girl explains. “That’s how modern people name couples.”

“Sounds like a psychiatric diagnosis,” Night snorts, also patched into the call.

“Oh shut up. Yours is ‘NorthNight,’ by the way.”

“We’re not a couple,” North snaps. “Go to hell.”

“Then what are yours—‘PhuPahn’?” Norawit laughs.

“‘PhuwinPahn,’” Phuwin offers.

“Sounds like some ancient demon,” Nattawat says.

“Am I interrupting? This is cute and all, but who are you marrying me off to?” Pond chimes in from behind.

“Well, since you’re in the same car as Satang—how about ‘PondTang’?” Phuwin suggests.

“Go to hell. We’re friends,” Pond says.

“I’d rather die alone than date him,” Satang protests.

“We’re friends too,” Pahn says.

“So… who’s gonna tell her?” Nattawat asks. Everyone laughs—except the Skyline crew.

“Tell me what?” Pahn asks.

“For you it might be friendship, but Cypher disagrees. He’s been camping in the friend zone,” Norawit says.

“Wait—seriously?” she laughs, turning to her driver.

“Okay, no. Let’s not do this. What are you even saying?” Tangsakyuen groans.

“Perfect moment to confess,” Night says.

“Confess what?” Phuwin asks.

“That you like her. Don’t play dumb,” Nattawat says.

“Well, we all like her. We’re one group,” Phuwin argues.

“Cypher!” North yells. “You’re annoying even me now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I barely tolerate that annoying girl.”

“Excuse me? I’ll show you ‘annoying’ when we stop,” Pahn snaps.

“Moment’s gone, people. Operation aborted,” Pond announces like a cop.

“Idiot,” Norawit sighs.

“And it started so well,” Tang adds. “Missed opportunity.”

“Screw you all,” Phuwin laughs.

“Well, since we’re all here—how about a race?” Pond suggests. “Finish line’s the welcome sign.”

“You’re joking? Racing you is like racing kids,” Nattawat scoffs.

“Then keep driving. Losing team cooks dinner tonight,” Night says. “Motivation not to come last.”

“Pray I don’t lose,” Tangsakyuen laughs. “Or you’ll starve.”

“He’s right. I cook like shit too,” Pahn adds.

“Line up, losers,” Nattawat says.

He eases off the gas, letting Pond’s Mazda pass, while Night allows the Skyline to overtake. The Jirochtikul brothers give them a head start—one has an elite sports car, the other the best racer among them with a tuned Mustang.

“One,” Pond says.

“Two,” Nattawat replies.

“Three—” Phuwin drags out impatiently, gripping the wheel.

“Go,” Night says.

They all hit the gas at once, racing close together. The road is straight and clear, barely any traffic, so they let themselves fly. The town is just ahead—and for them, the rest of the road will pass in what feels like seconds.

To avoid wasting time and give them a fair shot, the older Jirochtikul waits for the right moment—then suddenly swerves aside and slams on the gas, overtaking the Skyline. He snatches the lead easily at the very start of the improvised race, but Phuwin doesn’t give up that fast. He sticks to him like a shadow, smoothly weaving from side to side.

Night is battling Pond for first place, and they keep stealing the crown from each other, trading the lead again and again. Other cars honk angrily as all four of them tear past at

reckless speed, but none of them care. This is their dose of adrenaline, their high, and they're drunk on it.

According to the navigation system, the finish line—a road sign—is half a mile ahead. Of course, everyone already knows who will win this race without question. Nattawat is the only one reckless enough to take that speed and still make the turn. The real fight now is for second and third place; no one wants to be the loser among the best.

The cars ease off the gas slightly and start weaving through traffic, playing a dangerous game of lane-hopping. The flow here is much heavier, forcing them to cut between other vehicles in chaotic patterns.

Naturally, Nattawat reaches the turn first. He slips into it with a controlled drift, leaving the others behind along with the sharp scream of burning tires. Pond follows close behind, managing to overtake Phu using the same technique. He threads perfectly between cars, enters the turn cleanly, and flashes his rival the middle finger through the window, laughing cockily.

That leaves Night and Phuwin as the losers, slowed by a truck ahead of them cruising calmly in the far lane. It's moving at a steady pace and, in a few meters, will block the entrance to the turn entirely. If they don't make it through in time, they'll be forced to loop around.

The younger Jirochtikul's car sits low and sleek, but even that won't magically allow it to slip under the massive trailer. So he chooses another path, one that reeks of risk. Behind the truck, another car follows at just enough distance for a brutal maneuver. He only needs to slip between them.

Night glances quickly at the mirrors and tightens his grip on the steering wheel, a suspicious smirk tugging at his lips. North looks back and forth between him and the road, blinking in confusion, trying to figure out what the driver is planning. Night exhales sharply, then jerks into the adjacent lane, flashing his headlights at the cipher. He floors the accelerator, rapidly closing the distance to the obstacle.

"No! No! No!" North protests, finally realizing what he's about to do, throwing his hands up. "We can't! You're not Nattawat—you can't drive like that!"

"Don't be scared. I know what I'm doing," the guy says calmly, yanking the gear lever.

"Yeah?! You're going to kill us, you idiot! Don't you dare! You won't make it!"

"Do you trust me?"

"No! Of course not! Are you insane?! Slow down!"

"You'll have to."

Night grins and jerks the Martin sideways. He times it perfectly, slipping between the truck and a red minivan. With ease, he pulls the handbrake—the car skids across the asphalt like

it's ice—then glides into the turn, cranking the wheel under a storm of furious honking. The car almost spins out, but he keeps control, straightening smoothly.

North sits frozen for a few seconds, mouth slightly open in shock. He blinks rapidly, still unable to fully process what just happened. His heart pounds like crazy. He's used to risk—but this was too sudden, too close.

Holy shit. They passed within centimeters of the front and rear of two other cars and survived. What the hell?

Turns out, he's just as much of a lunatic as his brother. And even if the stunt looked spectacular from the outside, it was insanely dangerous.

"Scared?" Jirochtikul asks smugly, smiling.

"You're completely fucked in the head!" Titicharoenrak yells, shoving his shoulder. Jirochtikul laughs. "What were you even thinking?! We could've missed it! We could've crashed! We could've died!"

"Oh? So you do want to live?" he shoots back. "Then what are you thinking when you risk your life so carelessly?"

"Did you seriously just give me a heart attack?! Are you out of your damn mind?! I'll kill you myself!" North snaps, hitting him again.

"Hey, hey, easy there, tiger—we're still on the road," Night laughs, throwing him a satisfied glance. He looks so damn proud of himself that the passenger can only groan and scoff in furious disbelief. "That was improvisation."

"I'm never getting into a car with you again."

"But it worked. Look how scared you were for yourself. You only get one life—learn to value it."

"It's my life. I'll deal with it myself. And you could've killed both of us—or someone else, by the way. Psycho."

"And you'll kill both of you if you don't stop," Night says quietly.

"What are you talking about?" North asks, startled.

"Your relationship with your brother—it's exactly what you just saw. Like you're sitting in the same car. You're driving, he's the passenger. Neither of you is wearing a seatbelt. And whether you crash or keep speeding, risking everything—that's on you."

"Oh, what, you're gonna lecture me now? Fucking psychologist," Titicharoenrak mutters, turning toward the window.

"No. I'm not teaching you. I just want you to stop smashing your head against the wall for no reason. You matter to a lot of people."

“This shouldn’t concern you at all. So don’t you dare risk my ass like that again.”

“You’re right. It shouldn’t concern me,” Jirochtikul says, glancing at him.

But it does.

He watches the boy lean back in his seat, eyes following the passing light poles, and lets out a deep breath. For some damn reason, everything about him matters far too much. Every day, the fear for him only grows stronger. The longer they’re close, the stronger the urge to protect him from everything around him becomes.

Even though the greatest enemy he has is himself.

North is the source of all his problems, and saving him from himself is nearly impossible. It was his recklessness—his weakness, in a way—that led him into the situation he can’t escape now. He’s vulnerable. He has psychological scars. He struggles with alcohol and drugs, and the fight is brutal—but he’s trying.

For his brother, he’s willing to do almost anything, and he’s proving it right now through his actions. Maybe he’ll stumble again. Maybe more than once. But at least he’s holding on with everything he has—for him.

And Jirochtikul wants to help. As much as he possibly can.

“If I’m being honest,” North says quietly, still staring out the window, a shy smile tugging at his lips, “that was kind of cool. Just… don’t risk my life for nothing again.”

“I won’t,” Jirochtikul replies, smiling.

The cozy little town of Ojai lies in Ventura County. It rests in a beautiful valley between the ridges of the Topatopa Mountains, offering breathtaking views of the peaks from nearly every angle. Their summits bask in sunlight every single day, while the slopes remain lush and green year-round. The town’s greatest treasure isn’t its infrastructure—it’s its nature.

In this picturesque corner of the Californian mountains, chain stores are forbidden, and no buildings are allowed to rise higher than two stories. The locals are determined to preserve the town’s unique energy and atmosphere, shielding it from the harsher influence of modern civilization. And really, could there be a more perfect place for a secluded getaway?

All of this made Ojai feel completely unique, unlike anywhere else. It was like a small pearl among countless polished gemstones. In cities like Los Angeles, everything overflowed with luxury and pomp, but here, it was the opposite. Beauty lived in simplicity. The place carried a distinct charm, something Norawit had never encountered before.

It was his first time here, and he watched everything with genuine curiosity: the unusual architecture, the locals. The buildings were simple, mostly wooden, almost primitive in their design. And the people—simple too, or perhaps "provincial" was a better word. They wore ordinary clothes, straw hats, and clearly didn't care how they looked in anyone else's eyes. Elderly people strolled leisurely down the streets, small children ran around laughing, and there were surprisingly few young adults.

Titicharoenrak rolls the window all the way down and leans out slightly, resting his head on his crossed arms. The view is so stunning it almost steals his breath away. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply, drawing in the clean mountain air with a smile. Breathing feels effortless here—free. No exhaust fumes, no city filth. Just the scent of grass, sunflowers, and crisp mountain freshness. It's strange, almost like learning how to breathe all over again.

His silly smile widens when he notices a group of local kids waving at them enthusiastically, as if greeting important guests. They're genuinely happy to see new faces. Tourists do come here, but cars like these are a rare sight. Norawit lifts his hand and waves back, watching their faces light up over something so small. Incredibly sweet.

He exhales loudly, casting a bright, happy glance at a clearly pleased Nattawat before smiling even wider himself.

He feels happy here, even though he's only just arrived. This trip was exactly what he needed. When life sends you tumbling downhill, sometimes you have to hit pause and simply breathe. Ojai was that pause for him.

Here, he didn't have to fear nightly phone calls from Damian. He didn't flinch at every message, terrified of bad news about his brother. This place gave him peace. The warm sun gently heated his cheeks, and a soft breeze played with his hair, lifting it and scattering it around his face. The tender air wrapped around him, teasing his skin, slipping through his fingers when he stretched his hand out to feel it.

He really did feel better.

People came to this quiet, remote town to immerse themselves in nature, to meditate, hike the mountains, create art, or simply escape the noise of everyday life. It was the perfect place to sort through tangled thoughts. Surrounded by so much calm and beauty, you couldn't help but feel an inexplicable sense of bliss.

The locals believed that the town's special spirituality came from the valley's unique geography, its ability to draw in the energy of both the sun and the moon. What's more, one of the oldest Native American tribes in North America had lived on this land for centuries. Along the roadside, local farmers sold fresh fruits and vegetables they had grown themselves with care and love. Horses and fluffy sheep grazed in green meadows.

Such a small, simple world, so completely opposite to the City of Angels. Truly the perfect place.

The Lertratkosum family home stood on open land near the base of a hill, close to the edge of the forest. It was bigger than Norawit had imagined. A two-story white house with a green

roof and carved shutters, set against the backdrop of the mountains, looked like something straight out of a fairy tale. Almost unreal, like a still from a National Geographic documentary about rural America.

They park the cars one after another on the lawn, and the long journey finally comes to an end. Doors slam shut, relieved sighs echo from different directions. The sun has nearly set, leaving behind a sky painted in soft pinks and oranges. Everyone slowly steps out of their cars, stretching, looking around. Now, only one thing awaits them: rest, surrounded by the people closest to their hearts.

“So?” Nattawat asks, wrapping his arms around Norawit from behind. “What do you think?”

“It doesn’t feel real,” Norawit says with a smile, gazing at the mountain peaks. “Not after everything that’s been happening in my life lately.”

“Forget about all that while we’re here. At least about Damian—he let you go himself. It’s just us and our friends now. North’s here too, he’ll be fine. And he seems to be under double supervision, huh?” Nattawat smirks, glancing toward the Martin where his brother is getting out.

“Looks like it,” Norawit replies with a warm laugh. “Your little brother hasn’t taken his eyes off him once.”

“And still refuses to admit the obvious.”

“That sounds familiar.”

“Well,” Nattawat drawls, kissing Norawit’s neck, “you did win me over in the end. Maybe he’ll manage too?”

“You didn’t resist very hard,” Norawit teases. “Weren’t you the one trying to seduce me into dirty sex the first time we met?”

Nattawat bursts out laughing, remembering it clearly—how he’d robbed him, nearly broken his nose, and actually had tried to seduce him in the most ridiculous way possible.

“I never stood a chance,” he says. “I just realized it in time.”

“Hey! Enough with the flirting—you’ll have plenty of time for that later. How about helping instead?” Pond shouts while unloading the car.

Nattawat sighs softly, kisses Norawit once more, then heads over to help his friend. Norawit grabs a few paper grocery bags from the Mustang and follows him into the house.

Inside, it was ridiculously cozy. Lertratkosum’s parents had left to travel about a month ago, yet the house still carried a gentle, sweet scent, as if fresh flowers had only just been taken away. The air was also filled with the warm aroma of wood. High ceilings, large windows, and spacious rooms made the place feel open and light, while the charming country-style interior wrapped everything in comfort.

The true charm of their family home lay in its authenticity. It was as close to nature as possible, built with natural materials and surrounded by greenery on all sides. Decorative wooden beams across the ceiling, soft textiles, and modern appliances blended together seamlessly, all designed with one goal in mind: comfort. It was a beautiful place, and they were about to spend an entire mini-vacation here.

A few hours slipped by unnoticed as everyone busied themselves with something. The losers of the race—Pahn and Phuwin—were put in charge of dinner. They looked oddly adorable in the kitchen, like a couple who had just moved in together and had absolutely no idea how to cook. Nattawat had to come to their rescue, he was the only one who could truly handle a stove and feed the group properly.

Pond and North prepared the bedrooms and sorted out their shared things. Norawit took care of the firewood and the bonfire, while Tang and Night set up a canopy on the lawn in front of the house so they could eat outside. After another hour of nonstop activity, they finally gathered around the table, happily devouring what was, for the most part, cooked by the older Jirochtikul.

Titicharoenrak already knew his boyfriend's cooking skills well, so he wasn't surprised by how good it was, but the others were genuinely shocked.

Spending time with them here felt like a gift. Especially after all the shit happening around them. At some point, Norawit completely relaxed and forgot that once they returned home, everything would go back to the way it was. He'd once again wake up every day thinking about how to win the race, how to save his brother, how to save himself.

But he didn't want to burden his mind with that now. Right now, everyone felt amazing—him included. Pond was telling one funny story after another, wildly gesturing as he spoke, while Tang cracked his stupid jokes, making everyone laugh until tears streamed down their faces. They were loud and chaotic, constantly interrupting each other to add their own comments. Their laughter echoed through the quiet night, filling Norawit's chest with an overwhelming warmth and tenderness.

He sat a little apart by the fire, watching them thoughtfully, a serene smile never leaving his lips. Only now—gathered together for the first time in such a cozy, peaceful atmosphere—did he truly realize how deeply he loved all of them. He had lost his biological family, but he had found another one just as precious.

He had known Pond for many years, ever since he first got into racing. To him, Pond had always been like an older brother—someone who would step in at any moment, always ready to help and cover his back. Satang had become close to him surprisingly quickly; being together felt easy and natural, like they were on the same wavelength.

Night had taken on a specific role in Norawit's life from the very beginning. His first impression of him had been deceiving, but now Norawit understood just how deep and complex he really was. Reliable. Steady. And, frankly, the fact that he clearly cared for Norawit's younger brother had won him over more than anything.

Pahn was the only girl who had secured a place in his heart—like a younger sister who constantly needed watching over. And Phuwin… Phuwin was his childhood best friend, one of the closest people in his life. They'd been through so much together since their school days, and Norawit hoped nothing and no one would ever destroy that bond.

But two people here held a special place in his life—North and Nattawat.

His younger brother was his soul. No one could truly understand the depth and value of their relationship unless they had someone just as important in their own life. They had their difficulties, of course, but if Norawit once felt like they were drifting apart, that feeling vanished the moment he learned the truth. And it filled him with relief.

That gnawing fear retreated. Now he knew his brother would tell him everything buried deep inside his heart—if and when he was ready to talk. It felt like everything had finally fallen back into place, once unnecessary secrets disappeared. And that was the best change he'd experienced in a long time.

And then there was Nattawat.

He had claimed Norawit's heart completely and irrevocably. Did he truly love this man? Was it that once-in-a-lifetime, forever kind of love everyone dreamed of? Norawit asked himself that question often—almost every time they were apart, and every single moment they were together.

What was love, really? A perfect balance of all the essential building blocks for a "happily ever after." Their path hadn't been easy. They worked hard—on themselves and on their relationship. And in a relatively short time, they had built what they had now.

Norawit knew that, for Nattawat, an ideal relationship meant chemistry, understanding, honesty, trust, and feelings. And it seemed to him that they had gathered all of those pieces to lay a strong foundation for their future.

The chemistry between them had been phenomenal from the very first meeting. Sometimes they understood each other without words. They were honest when they shared their deepest secrets. And they trusted each other, at least mostly. Norawit was ready to put his life in Nattawat's hands without hesitation, but Nattawat once admitted he trusted him only ninety-five percent.

Which meant there was still a little work to do.

Feelings are the highest form of chemistry, understanding, honesty, and trust. When all four come together with enough strength, feelings are born—real and insane.

Only now did Norawit fully understand those words, watching the man he loved. Yes. He loved him. "Infatuation" was far too weak a word for what filled his heart every time Nattawat laughed, scrunching his nose, or looked at him with those breathtaking eyes.

Nattawat laughed again at one of Satang's jokes, then slowly turned toward Norawit, who was sitting in a wicker chair by the fire. He noticed the soft, slightly nostalgic smile on his

face and immediately walked over to him. Gently, he settled onto Norawit's lap and carefully pulled the hood of his light blue windbreaker over Norawit's head.

"I'm not cold, baby," Norawit said, wrapping his arms around his waist.

"Maybe not, but the wind gets chilly at night. And you're not feeling great as it is. I'll worry less this way," Nattawat replied, hugging him by the shoulders. "What were you thinking about all alone over here?"

"I was just watching my favorite people," Norawit said softly. "Moments like this are so rare —when we're all together and just… resting. Before, everything was different. Bikers stuck with bikers, racers with racers. But now it's changed. In some way, because of you and me." He smiled up at him, eyes full of admiration.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Nattawat said, holding him closer. "If it weren't for us, they probably never would've gathered like this."

"It really is. Without all of you, my life would be empty. It's strange I didn't realize it sooner. I always thought I wasn't lucky or happy enough because I lacked something, but my happiness is you. Every single person here has their own place in my life, and I'm scared of losing any of you."

"Everything will be okay. We'll handle it together," Nattawat said, nodding toward their friends. "Look at the army you've got behind you. Any of them would fight for you and for North. You're not alone."

"I'm actually incredibly happy, because I have you," Norawit whispered. "I love you all so much. Especially I—" He faltered, blinking quickly as he realized those precious words almost slipped out on their own.

"God, your hands are freezing," Nattawat complained, taking Norawit's hand and immediately sliding it under his jacket. "Are you crazy? You're cold and you didn't say anything."

"So… did I end up with the most caring boyfriend in the world?" Norawit laughed, warming his hands against Nattawat's body.

"Yes," Nattawat replied smugly. "You're very lucky, you know. I'm handsome, smart, caring, sexy, and I cook really well."

"I feel a little attacked," Norawit smiled. "I'm nowhere near as perfect as you."

"Yeeaah," Nattawat drawled, cupping his face. "You're right. You're not as good. You're just the best."

He leaned in and kissed him—softly, carefully, with such tenderness it felt like he was afraid to hurt him with even the slightest movement, knowing Norawit's body still ached a little after meeting the asphalt.

For Titicharoenrak, Nattawat's kisses were a cure for everything. He tuned out the world completely, focusing only on the one he held in his arms—his own small, private universe.

Loud laughter bursts out from the table where the others are sitting, and both of them glance in that direction. A few people have decided to drink and wrap up this cozy, almost family-like evening with a game of Truth or Dare—a classic party game they love to play when alcohol is involved.

And this time, it seems Phuwin has drawn a dare: to dance.

He groans in protest but still pushes himself to his feet, rolling his neck slightly like a boxer warming up before a big fight. Satang puts on some upbeat, ridiculous song, and Phuwin starts halfheartedly rehearsing what's about to be his performance.

"Wait, let me set up the camera," Pond laughs, pulling out his phone.

"Don't forget, the goal is to make it sexy," Pahn adds, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"Show this to anyone and I'll kill you," Phu says, laughing drunkenly himself before finally starting to dance.

The song is bouncy and silly, and he's supposed to make it playful. It's impossible not to laugh at how ridiculous he looks at first. He jokes around, flapping his arms like a chicken and jerking his legs to the beat, but the others aren't satisfied. They boo him loudly, demanding a real performance.

Then the song shifts into a smoother verse. Phuwin slides his hands down his body, rolling his hips in a slow, exaggerated way, like he's seducing the entire room in some dusty cowboy bar. His expression changes instantly—lazy, sultry—and instead of laughter, the room fills with clapping and teasing cheers.

"Oh my god, they're such idiots," Norawit says, laughing and shaking his head.

"Alright, that's enough. I did my dare," Phuwin declares, dropping back into his seat with a relieved sigh.

"Cla-assic," Pond drawls through his laughter. "Twitter would lose its mind."

"Hey—don't you dare!"

"Okay, okay, relax, playboy. Let's keep going."

"Night, you're next," Phuwin says, taking a sip of his drink.

"I never said I was playing," Night replies, shrugging indifferently.

"You're drinking. That means you're automatically playing," Pahn says, pointing at him with a long black nail and throwing Pond a strange little wink.

"Yeah, come on. Don't separate from the group," Pond adds, smiling at her.

“Fine,” the younger Jirochtikul sighs dramatically. “Go ahead. I’m ready to dance, sing, or do whatever insane thing pops into your drunk heads.”

“Truth or dare?” Phuwin asks, narrowing his eyes mischievously.

“Truth.”

“Alright, do you—”

“Do you like North?” Pond blurts out suddenly, elbowing him in the side and cutting Phuwin off.

Phuwin freezes for a moment, then slowly realizes what kind of game they’ve decided to play.

“What?” he scoffs, looking at them one by one. “Are you serious? What kind of stupid question is that?”

“It’s a normal one,” Phuwin laughs. “Easy answer—yes or no. I’ve been asked worse tonight.”

“Yeah, but you never answered whether you like Pahn,” Night shoots back.

“First of all, that was outside the game. Second, I said I can’t stand her. That was my answer,” he smirks, wiggling his eyebrows. “Want me to repeat the question?”

“You’re idiots. What are you even talking about?” North snaps, shooting the group an irritated look, clearly uncomfortable.

“You’re not playing, so hush,” Pond says, putting on the most innocent face imaginable. “So? What’s it gonna be?”

“If I don’t want to answer, I drink—those are the rules, right?” Night asks, then downs his drink in one go. “There.”

“Oh, we’ve got slightly different rules,” Pahn says with a shrug. “If you refuse truth, you automatically choose a dare.”

“What kind of rules are those?!”

“We changed them. Who even plays by the classic rules anymore? You’re stuck, bro,” Nattawat teases, laughing.

“You’re not playing either, so shut it,” Night shoots back with a smile. It’s easily the most awkward situation his friends have ever dragged him into, but he knows exactly what they’re doing. “Fine. What’s the dare? Another stupid dance? Strip naked? Sing?”

“Oh! I vote for the second one,” Pahn laughs, raising her hand. “But another time. We’ve got something better.”

“I’m already scared.”

“Kiss him,” Phuwin says, pointing straight at North.

“Are you out of your minds?!” North explodes. “I’m not kissing him! Did you forget to ask me about this?!”

“I get it now,” Night says calmly, smirking and pressing his tongue against his cheek. “These rules only apply to me, right? You planned all of this, you assholes.”

“Guys, what is he talking about?” Pond laughs.

“No idea. We’re just playing a harmless game,” Phuwin replies. “If you do it, you can dare me to kiss anyone at the table. Easy.” He leans toward Pahn, earning a light slap from her.

“Hey! Idiots! I should at least agree to this, what are you trying to—”

North cuts himself off when Night kisses him—exactly the kind of kiss everyone expected.

Silence falls.

Phuwin covers his mouth, raising his eyebrows as if silently asking the others, Are you seeing this? Pond bumps Pahn’s fist in triumph, they’ve completed their mission, while Satang silently shakes with laughter at the chaos.

For a few seconds, everyone just stares. Then the room explodes with excited noise, like a bunch of elementary school kids losing their minds.

They’d planned this prank so the two of them would finally look at each other differently, and stop being afraid of it. They were counting on the younger Jirochtikul’s boldness, because Titicharoenrak would’ve kept circling around the truth forever, too scared to admit what was obvious to everyone else.

He thought he simply wasn’t good enough for someone like him.

He was wrong.

There had always been tension between them, sharp and undeniable, and everyone in the room knew exactly what kind it was.

“…to do,” North finishes quietly when Night pulls back and licks his lips. “What did you just do?”

“Answered the truth and completed the dare,” Night says, smiling shyly from the corner of his mouth.

“You saw that too, right?” Nattawat laughs softly, turning to his boyfriend and wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

“Your brother did what?” Norawit asks, laughing in disbelief.

“Looks like he completely stunned yours,” Nattawat replies, smiling proudly.

One of the greatest advantages of solitude was silence.

In it, thinking came easily. Nothing intruded between the desire to create something new and the intense process of concentration. Some people were most productive during the day, but Damian had always worked primarily at night. Mornings were for logistics, supply issues, and negotiations. The fact that he lived in the same tower as his office meant he could walk into his workspace deep into the night, just like now, wearing silk pajamas without a second thought.

Silence gave him a sense of peace. And, fortunately, he was almost always alone, even when surrounded by people.

It was hard to throw him off balance. He was used to sudden movements, unpredictable behavior, the chaos others brought with them. Still, there was one person who always managed to surprise him, every single time.

His forced business partner.

The man who, years ago, had effectively patented Damian’s brain and used it for his own purposes. And the longer Damian lived like this, the less desire he felt to change anything. For what? His life was stable. On paper, he had everything one could want: money, power, a corporation, influence, the freedom to invent and exploit his own potential.

There was nothing more waiting for him anyway.

He was a terrible person. A killer. A manipulator. Incapable of real feelings. No better than the founder of Influence, the very criminal organization that treated him like a valuable asset rather than a human being.

Calm footsteps echoed across the black marble floor behind him. Damian didn’t need to turn around to know who had come at such a late hour. Only one person in this world allowed himself such audacity, walking into his office without warning, as if it belonged to him.

In a way, it did.

He had every right. He owned Damian.

“Good evening, Hwang.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be asleep,” the man replies with a crooked grin.

“It’s late for visits. You could’ve waited until morning.”

“I’m busy tomorrow, and the days after. We need to settle a few things.”

“Well,” Lim sighs, slowly turning toward him, “forgive me, I’m not exactly dressed to receive guests.” He gestures lazily to his silk pajamas. “You could’ve at least called.”

“Courtesy has never been my thing, boy. You know that. I was passing by and decided to talk. No time for warnings.”

“Of course,” Damian mutters, rolling his eyes as he turns back to the screen.

He didn’t hate him.

He despised him.

Hatred was hidden aggression, born of anger toward something one wanted to destroy but couldn’t, usually because of fear. Hwang deserved hatred. But Damian was afraid of him. Afraid to such a degree that he was even afraid to hate him.

He tried to remain cold around him, composed, but it was difficult. Sometimes his self-control cracked. This man had caused him so much pain and damage that hatred alone felt exhausting. Maybe it was horrifying, but Damian had accepted it.

What he felt were two dominant emotions: hostility and disgust.

And, to his own shame, some twisted form of attachment.

He would never openly confront him, he knew exactly what Hwang was capable of. How far he could go. A soulless monster, and the more Damian learned about him, the more convinced he became of it.

“What are you working on?” the guest asks, genuinely curious.

“A weapon capable of wiping out several cities in a matter of seconds,” Damian replies absently, jotting notes onto a schematic.

“Care to explain?”

“An explosive device based on nuclear energy, released through a chain reaction of heavy-nuclei fission and a thermonuclear reaction,” Damian says, pointing at specific components.

“So… you built a nuclear bomb?” Hwang whistles.

“Yep. With remote activation,” Lim replies flatly, eyes fixed on the Cast interface. “Press one little button from anywhere on Earth—boom. Chicago or San Francisco erased from the map.”

“I still can’t believe you can just stand there and casually invent weapons of mass destruction,” Hwang chuckles, stepping closer.

“My brain is a weapon of mass destruction. If not for my intellect, some of humanity’s problems wouldn’t exist at all. It’s simple for me. Though for someone with an average IQ, like yours, it’s probably hard to grasp.”

“Did you just call me stupid?”

“Did I?” Damian smirks.

“And who are you planning to sell it to?” Hwang asks.

“The U.S. military, of course.”

“Of course,” he laughs bitterly. “And what do the Iranians get?”

Damian shrugs without looking at him.

“Her twin sister. They’ll just pay twice as much to have the same toy.”

“Son of a bitch,” Hwang says with mock admiration.

“Funny coming from you. Have you seen yourself? A one-of-a-kind bastard.”

“You’re brilliant, Damian. What you create is genius. But you sell it to both sides, and I’m the bastard?”

“Let’s start with the fact that you dragged me into this business.”

“I offered you a partnership. Accepting was your choice,” Hwang smirks.

“The illusion of choice is your favorite perversion,” Damian says with disgust.

Hwang studies him with a cold, appraising gaze. They’d known each other for years, he remembered Damian as a boy. Now he was a confident, powerful man. But the beauty of it was that he’d been trained to obedience. Like a well-conditioned dog, he would always follow orders.

It worked flawlessly.

Hwang had leverage. Strong leverage.

Damian resisted sometimes. Showed teeth. But in the end, he always complied.

“Doesn’t your conscience bother you?” Hwang asks mockingly.

“And yours?” Damian shoots back, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t sell weapons to enemies.”

“Enemies?” Damian scoffs, shaking his head. “The terrorists I deal with are scum, and that doesn’t make me better than them, you’re right. But the real enemies are closer than people think. In our city, crime thrives largely thanks to those who are supposed to protect civilians. Cops. Politicians. Corrupt filth. We both know that, we exploit it every chance we get. So tell me… who’s the real enemy?”

“You think too much,” Hwang replies indifferently. “Everyone survives however they can.”

“There’s no worse enemy than the one who smiles and talks about friendship,” Damian says quietly, exhaling. “So why are you here?”

“To discuss business.”

“We covered everything last time, at the casino. I told you I’m working on it.”

“What stage are you at?”

“The list of potential participants is almost ready.”

“Almost?”

“It’s fluid. We still have time.”

“We don’t. Clients are waiting for this race.”

“I know. And I’m not wasting time. Precision is everything. This year the filming will be higher quality, your clients asked for it. I’m prepping the equipment and designing the track for the first stage. They also want the qualifiers streamed live. That complicates things.”

“Show me the list.”

“Cast, load the Powerslide participants.”

Damian exhales heavily and saves his work as the robot processes the command.

This race was a constant headache.

Extreme precision was required—but wealthy, deranged voyeurs loved watching people risk their lives. And that worked perfectly for Hwang. He made a fortune off it every year.

From the outside, everything looked voluntary, at least until the first stage. Racers applied willingly. Organizers decided who got in. Mortality rates didn’t scare anyone. Speed was always a risk.

No one ever leaked details.

They didn’t survive.

There was always one winner. And thanks to specialized technology, the winner’s mind could be altered—memories erased, everything unnecessary wiped clean.

“Here you are, sir,” the robot says.

Six photographs appear on the screen—names, brief profiles. Each of them has potential. Hunger. A desire to win.

None of them know they’re already chosen.

The qualifiers are just a spectacle, a showcase for the clients to decide who to bet on. This year, they want it live. Passing is brutally difficult, but only because if you’re not on this list, you’ll never enter Powerslide, no matter how talented you are.

Exceptions happen. Rarely.

You need a patron.

“Hm,” Hwang hums, studying the photos. “Impressive.”

“They’re the best I’ve found so far.”

“Where do you keep finding them?” Hwang laughs.

“Different places,” Damian shrugs. “‘The Loop’ is a goldmine of urban talent. I watch them there, then track the ones who interest me. Most of them have the same weaknesses—speed addicts usually come with alcohol, drugs, or legal problems.”

“The Loop is paradise for us, and a thorn in L.A.’s side.”

“Yes, but they’re technically clean. Street racing is illegal, but they rarely leave the track.”

“That’s the issue. There’s nothing to shut down. Legal races, private land, no gambling loopholes. If you interfere, they’ll start racing on public streets, and that’s worse. Besides, it’s street culture. No one complains.”

“Works in your favor. You get trained racers.”

“Exactly. What’s wrong with kids having fun?” Hwang grins, clapping Damian’s shoulder.

“I wouldn’t know. I have different interests,” Damian replies coldly, stepping aside and shrugging off his hand.

“Why is there only one Titicharoenrak on the list?” Hwang asks sharply. “Where’s the other one? I told you I want both.”

“Why?” Damian narrows his eyes. “One makes good money with his fists. The other will do his job on the track.”

“They both need to die.”

“The second one’s already a corpse. He’ll overdose or get killed in a fight. He’s a terrible racer, always drunk or high. I know him well. He won’t last.”

“And his brother?” Hwang asks, staring at Norawit’s photo with naked hatred.

The rage in his eyes is consuming. Personal. What had Titicharoenrak done to him?

When Hwang ordered Damian to bring the biker in, it hadn’t seemed important. That was business. But now it was clearly personal. Worse, Titicharoenrak was dating Nattawat.

A live grenade.

Hwang didn’t know that yet.

“He’s in training,” Damian says calmly. “Most likely dies in the second stage. He’s good, but not good enough.”

“And no one will be to blame,” Hwang smiles cryptically.

Damian watches him skeptically.

“You’re sure he won’t back out?”

“He can’t. I’ve trapped him. He has a powerful reason to win. He’ll race. And he’ll be trained by the best driver from The Loop.”

“Don’t tell me it’s—”

“Nattawat Jirochtikul.”

The man exhales irritably, folding his arms across his chest, then gives a slow nod to his own thoughts. Of course he knows that name. The boy had tried to get into the race twice and had been exceptional, but Hwang disapproved of his participation for obvious reasons. Training under a mentor like that drastically increased Norawit’s chances of winning, and that was completely against his plans.

Interfering now, however, would be difficult. It could raise uncomfortable suspicions about the integrity of the race itself. So for now, he would have to go with the flow. In any case, one of the twins could always be eliminated right in the middle of a race. Easy enough.

“Are they friends?” the man asks suspiciously.

“No idea. All I know is that he’s preparing him for the race,” Lim lies, choosing not to mention that he knows Jirochtikul personally.

“Nattawat,” Hwang sighs, shaking his head. “The troublesome son of a judge. Always causing problems. Street races, probation, gambling—and now he’s gotten involved with some biker who’s no better than he is. Where does one even see things like this, huh? An incredibly difficult boy. But a damn fine racer.”

Damian watches him closely, brows knitting together as he tries to guess what’s really going on in the man’s head. For some reason, his words sound like a veiled threat. Hwang might be

a bastard, but dragging both of them into this just to watch two boys tear each other apart seems excessive, even for him.

“Titicharoenrak must not win at any cost. You understand that, don’t you?” Hwang asks.

“If people bet on him, then it’s in both our interests, and his, that he wins. You know exactly what corner you backed him into.”

“You said he’s not that good. Which means no matter how Nattawat trains him, it won’t be a problem. People always bet on the strongest. In the end, he’s supposed to die.”

“Why do you want him dead so badly?” Damian asks, turning toward him.

“Personal reasons. I have information that one of the brothers is persistently digging into their parents’ deaths. And most likely, it’s Norawit. He seems clever.”

“So what?” Lim frowns.

“Don’t play dumb, Dem. The story of his family’s death is tightly connected to me. If my secrets come out, I’m finished. All of us are,” Hwang snaps, irritation slipping through.

“Has that ever stopped you before? You could give the order, and by tomorrow his friends would be planning his funeral.”

“It’s more complicated than you think. He’s gone too far with his investigation. I have intel that he tortured one of my old mercenaries. He might know something I don’t, like where certain compromising documents are. And if someone else knows about them too, that’s an extra headache. I need to find those damn files before he dies. That’s why I’m stalling and working quietly.”

“And the mercenary told him something?”

“Of course not,” Hwang scoffs. “But it’s still bad. That means there’s a chance he’s traced things back to Influence. We should send him a warning from them, make him shut up and calm down already.”

“What could he possibly have on you that scares you this much?” Lim asks.

“Something that would destroy me completely if it ever went public. Enough. Do your job,” Hwang says, clapping him on the shoulder. “If anything goes wrong with this, you’ll regret it.”

“Save your threats for the twins. They don’t impress me anymore. I’m doing my job regardless,” Damian replies flatly, closing the window with the racers’ photos. “If that’s all, you can leave.”

“One more request.”

“What do you want?”

“Titicharoenrak’s current location.”

“He left for Ojai. I don’t have his exact geolocation,” Lim says.

“Then find it and pass it on to my people. He needs to be warned,” Hwang says, smiling with a strange, unsettling anticipation.

“You can handle that perfectly well without me.”

Chapter 10: X

The next day in the small town of Ojai began with the whole close-knit group gathering on an abandoned stretch of highway at the foot of a hill, a place the locals barely used anymore. The area near the cliff looked like an old parking lot, partly surrounded by a rusty chain-link fence. Piles of worn-out tires and orange cones were scattered everywhere, and the asphalt was covered in circular skid marks. Most likely, this was where the handful of local kids came to have fun. It was a perfect spot to learn the basics of drifting: the paved lot offered enough space to maneuver and sharpen skills, while the small hill could be used to build speed and enter turns. It would have been foolish for Jirochtikul to take his trainee straight to the main track — first, he had to master the fundamentals somewhere safe.

The sun was merciless today, blazing like hell itself. The heat was so intense the air seemed to melt. California hadn't seen a drought and temperatures like this in ages — just yesterday evening there had been a pleasant, cool breeze, and now it was pure scorching inferno. Night, Pond, Tang, and North were sprawled out in the shade under a small canopy on folding chairs, looking like vacationers who were slowly dying from the suffocating heat. Only Pahn was truly enjoying the weather, lounging a little apart from them, soaking up the sun in short shorts and a bikini top.

Norawit adjusted the brim of his black baseball cap and watched as Nattawat pulled several brand-new sets of tires out of the Mustang's trunk, clearly preparing for serious training. He meant business, and in this situation, that was the only right approach. If the king of the Loop couldn't prepare him for the race, then no one could. And that would mean admitting he was incapable of it.

The calm, lazy atmosphere was suddenly torn apart by the roar of an engine and blasting music. There was no need to guess who was causing the chaos — seconds later, a dark-green Skyline skidded into the lot. Of course. Who else could make such a dramatic entrance? Phuwin showed off with a few sharp spins, shouted in triumph, and then slammed on the brakes in front of his friends. He leaned out the window, and flashed them a smug grin.

"Miss me?" Tangsakyuen laughed. "Or have you already died of thirst?"

"Where the hell have you been?" North groaned. "We're literally melting out here. This is north of LA — why is it this unbearable?"

"We figured the local farm girls kidnapped you," Tang added.

"Try finding a decent supermarket in this hole," Phuwin said with a grimace. "Not that easy."

"So, did you get it?" Pond asked.

"Obviously. It's me."

He grabbed a pack of ice-cold beer from the passenger seat and held it up. The guys groaned happily and clapped, like kids being teased with candy. Tang jogged over to grab the drinks, while Pahn laughed.

“God, boys are so easy,” she said, elegantly adjusting her heart-shaped sunglasses. “All you need is alcohol, cars, and boobs.”

“Some of us need something else, right?” Pond laughed, shooting Nattawat a glance. Nattawat responded with a middle finger.

“Seriously, Titicharoenrak, what are you doing to him? I don’t recognize my friend anymore.”

Norawit turned to Pond, lit the cigarette between his lips, and returned the rude gesture.

“Hey, baby, you look amazing,” Phu said playfully, staring at Pahn and winking.

“Very sweet, but I know,” she replied with a smile.

“I’ve got a car and alcohol, you know. Out of all of us, only you have the boobs.”

“Looking is allowed, cipher,” she teased.

“Bro, the friend zone is your natural habitat,” Norawit laughed.

“Insufferable girl,” Tangsakyuen sighed, grabbing a cold bottle of water and tossing it to him. “Heat survival kit for non-drinkers.”

“You’re the best friend in the world.”

“Enough flirting — it’s time to start training,” Nattawat said, climbing into the Mustang.

“Aren’t you supposed to put me behind the wheel?” Norawit asked, surprised.

“First, I’m going to show you what you need to be able to do before the qualifier. Stand in the middle of the lot.”

“Okay, but—”

“Do you trust me?”

“I do.”

“Then stand still. Don’t move.”

Norawit frowned, intrigued, but obeyed, walking to the center of the asphalt and waiting. He was intensely curious about what Nattawat had in mind. Jirochtikul drove far to the side and paused for a moment before revving the engine several times, kicking up dust. The car responded with a deep, thunderous growl that sent a sharp shiver through Norawit’s chest. It wasn’t fear — it was something else entirely. Anticipation.

The predatory headlights fixed on him like a hunter's gaze, and the longer the driver waited, the stronger the urge became for that beast to lunge. Not knowing what would happen next made it even more thrilling.

Nattawat tore forward, racing straight at him. Their friends leapt up, shouting in excitement, expecting a spectacular stunt. The instinctive reaction when a car barrels toward you is to run, but Norawit stayed rooted in place. He followed the instruction, trusting him completely, gripping the bottle of water tight from the tension.

At the last second, the Mustang snapped sideways, tires shrieking. It carved a wide circle around him, then another. The air filled with the heavy stench of burnt rubber and hot asphalt, and now it was clear why they'd brought extra tires. Under this sun and with this intensity, not only would they melt — the wheels would too. This coach was not about to take it easy on him.

Nattawat tightened the circle, drawing closer and closer, controlling the drift with effortless precision. The Mustang roared like a wild beast, leaving nearly perfect black rings on the asphalt. Norawit's heart slammed against his ribs, overwhelmed by the rush of emotions, especially when he lifted his eyes and briefly caught Nattawat's gaze through the window.

Wild. Unstoppable. Bold. Unshakably confident — that was Nattawat Jirochtikul. Not just a great racer, but someone who truly deserved every victory. Calm, restrained, carrying himself like a born winner. Everything seemed to slip into slow motion, as if the moment had been paused, and nothing else existed. The car glided around him, and thin white smoke curled up in lazy spirals from beneath its tires.

Jirochtikul stops after the third circle, pulling up so close that he's within arm's reach of Titicharoenrak, and with a smug smile, he plucks the cigarette from his tense fingers. He takes a couple of short drags, watching the mixture of awe and astonishment in Norawit's eyes.

"Hey, baby," he winks, exhaling the sharp smoke through his nose.

"Wow," Norawit breathes out, smiling.

"Be a good boy and you'll be able to do that too," Jirochtikul says.

"What was that?"

"You came to the right place when you asked me to teach you drifting. 'Powerslide' isn't just the name of some race. In drifting, it means controlled sliding — more precisely, when the car breaks into a skid not because of inertia, but because of excess torque. That's exactly what you just saw."

"So that's what a powerslide is?"

"Yeah. And lucky for you, that's what I'm best at, so I can teach you. Who knows what you'll be facing in that race?" Nattawat replies, stepping away from the driver's seat. "Now it's your turn."

Titicharoenrak slides behind the wheel, while Nattawat takes the passenger seat. They wait a moment as the others set up a makeshift barrier of tires to mark the turn. Norawit grips the steering wheel and takes several deep breaths.

“Okay,” Jirochtikul says soothingly, resting a hand on his thigh. “No panic. One step at a time.”

“I’m trying. What do I do? Is there going to be some kind of lecture?”

“First,” he says, reaching for Norawit’s seat belt and then quickly kissing his cheek, “buckle up.”

“It slipped my mind,” Norawit smiles.

“First rule: be gentle with my car. I remember how you almost planted the Skyline into the barrier on the Loop. Be careful.”

“I won’t promise, but I’ll try. And second?”

“Second, don’t forget that you’ll never master drifting in one go. You need a lot of practice. A lot. We’ll start simple, and gradually I’ll teach you different techniques. Before you can really feel drifting in the mountains, you need to learn the basics. Your task is to enter the marked zone. You’re allowed to knock down only one barrier — for your first time, that’ll be perfect,” Jirochtikul says, pointing at the stacks of old tires.

“And how do I do that?”

“To initiate the drift, you need to shift the car’s center of gravity to the front axle before the turn — use a brief tap on the brakes. Then, at the same time, steer into the skid and break the rear wheels loose. The most important part: pull the handbrake and hit the gas. Over time, you’ll start to feel instinctively when to do it. Let’s go.”

“And that’s it? Seriously? The lecture’s over?” Titicharoenrak asks, raising an eyebrow.

“We’ll learn mostly through practice. You know the physics of skidding and you can drive. I’ll correct you as we go,” Nattawat says, fastening his own seat belt.

“God,” Norawit exhales, starting the engine. “What am I getting myself into?”

In theory, everything sounded much easier than it turned out to be in practice. Consciously triggering a skid without fully knowing how to control it usually ended not in a clean drift, but in a spin. Again and again, Norawit tried to squeeze through the gap between those damn tires without hitting them, but failed every time. He either overdid the throttle or backed off too soon, turned the wheel too sharply or acted too abruptly. The guys reset the barriers over and over, and the training went on.

Nattawat was a patient instructor — relatively calm and focused. He guided Norawit gently, pointing out his mistakes. It was obvious he felt a flicker of disappointment when things didn’t work out, but he tried not to show it. He knew perfectly well that mastering this technique took enormous effort and far more than one attempt. And Norawit seemed to have

endless reserves of determination. The more he failed, the more aggressive and driven he became, starting over each time with even greater enthusiasm. He understood they had very little time to achieve real results, and so he pushed himself to the absolute limit. Their success depended entirely on him. He had to break himself if necessary, but learn — and fast — or victory would slip through his fingers.

Nearly two hours had passed, yet Norawit, exhausted and fuming with frustration, kept going stubbornly. Once again, he followed the now almost automatic sequence, coming down the hill and heading straight toward the lot. He clenched the steering wheel, rapidly approaching the imaginary turn. He was about to tap the brakes to start the maneuver, but Nattawat suddenly placed a hand on his leg.

“Too early,” he said. “Wait.”

The makeshift barrier loomed closer and closer, but Nattawat didn’t move his hand, signaling him not to rush. Norawit started to panic, realizing that, damn it, he was about to mess it up again.

“Nattawat,” he warned.

“Not yet,” Jirochtikul said calmly.

“But we’re close. I won’t make it,” Norawit frowned.

“You will, if you pick the right moment. Trust me.”

“I’m just going to ruin another try.”

“Now! Go!” Nattawat exclaimed, lightly patting his thigh.

Norawit braked sharply, then whipped the wheel into the drift line and hit the gas, sending the RPMs soaring. The Mustang roared low, sliding too hard to the side. He struggled to keep it on course, fighting not to spin out again.

“Gentler. Gentler, baby. Hold it, don’t panic,” Nattawat said calmly. “You’re good. Control the slide. You’ve got this.”

Norawit followed every instruction, and when he realized he was actually doing it almost right, a shocked breath escaped him. An incredible rush surged through him, like a second wind. It was unreal. He didn’t take the turn perfectly, but far better than before. The Mustang truly was a responsive car, and somehow, he was beginning to tame it. Its biggest advantage was how, when you pressed the gas, the weight shifted to the rear, loading the back wheels and lightening the front. That gave better traction under acceleration and reduced wheel spin — simple mechanics, powerful results.

After repeating the maneuver several more times, he finally clipped just one pyramid of tires, knocking off only the top few. Then he stopped, breathing hard, taking a few seconds to recover. He had done it. After dozens of failed attempts, he’d made a small step forward. In that moment, he was so damn proud of himself. The sensation was incredible. He needed to

feel this — to lift his spirits, to believe in himself. If he were on the Loop right now, he might have taken the turn with only a slight brush against the barrier. For a first training session, the progress was already visible. It was simpler than it seemed. Nattawat was right: all he had to do was shut off the panic and let himself feel the moment.

Now Norawit truly understood what it took to hold a car in a sustained drift — maintaining enough RPM to keep the rear wheels sliding, and constantly adjusting the trajectory. That was it. Catching the exact moment to initiate the maneuver was crucial. And if the car started to straighten out too early, all he had to do was press harder on the gas and increase the steering angle. Of course, if he overdid it, he'd slip into an uncontrollable skid and spin — just like in almost all his earlier attempts.

"Well," Nattawat finally broke the silence, smiling proudly, "first step done. How does it feel?"

"Insane," Norawit whispered, turning to him. "Now I understand what you feel when you take corners like that."

"Not quite. When you can do this effortlessly, in the middle of a race, it'll feel completely different. But you're close."

"Now I know my biggest mistake. I was rushing because I was afraid to fail — and that's exactly what made me fail."

"Right. But waiting too long is just as bad. Then you won't manage the trick at all and you'll slam straight into the barrier. It's a very fine line, but you'll learn to feel it through constant practice. We'll keep going."

"Thank you, Natt," Norawit said, smiling.

"Thank me when you win the race. For now, keep training — on your own. I'll watch," Nattawat replied, leaning in to kiss him.

The grueling training sessions continued for several days. From dawn till sunset, with barely any breaks, Norawit burned through fuel and shredded tires for the sake of a strong final result — and in many ways, he significantly improved. He felt more confident behind the wheel, even allowing himself to relax a little. He liked that Nattawat was always nearby, watching him intently. After every successful maneuver, he would praise him with exaggerated enthusiasm, flash him a thumbs-up, and send him back to the starting position again. For everyone else, it was a break. For them, it was anything but.

Today's training was very different from the others, because it took place in the mountains, on natural terrain. That made the task much harder for Titicharoenrak. Again and again, he made mistakes in maneuvers he seemed to have already mastered. At the foot of the slope stood Nattawat, Phuwin, and Tang. The others hadn't come to watch today — they were preparing for a short hike and needed to load the car with supplies. Pond's birthday was tomorrow, and he wanted to celebrate it somewhere deep in the forest, in a really cool spot. Not everyone was thrilled about sleeping in tents, but no one argued too much. Everyone knew Pond wouldn't drag them far into the woods unless it was truly worth it.

“I’ll bet five bucks he messes it up again. He’s pushing too hard,” Tangsakyuen said, watching the Mustang speed down the slope.

“Ten says he makes it,” Satang replied, adjusting the brim of his cap. “Dragon drives recklessly in corners too, so maybe that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“Do you two ever stop betting on everything?” Nattawat scoffed, never taking his eyes off the car. “Too early, too early, too early, Norawit. You should’ve held it longer.”

“He accelerated too much. He won’t manage it on dirt.”

“He’s not going to fly off the mountain, is he?” Satang asked.

“No, there’s a wide enough margin for maneuvering. Damn it, I told him, he started too soon,” Jirochtikul sighed, lacing his fingers over his head. “Sloppy driving. I don’t like it.”

The Mustang skidded hard through the turn, fishtailing wildly before coming to a stop without completing the maneuver. Norawit’s loud curses and frustrated shout carried down to them.

“Oof, he’s in a mood,” Satang winced.

“He’s just tired,” Phu said with a deep sigh. “He trains a lot. Maybe we should let him rest?”

“He’ll rest on the hike. We’re not leaving until he does it at least decently,” Nattawat replied, gesturing for him to try again. “One more time! That was bad! Less emotion, more technique!” he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth.

“You’re tough.”

“I’m responsible. I want him to win.”

“We all do. Everyone here understands how much depends on this damn race,” Phuwin said.

“Yeah. If we miss this chance, we’ll have to come up with two and a half million.”

“If only it were that simple. The problem is, Lim keeps North on a short leash. And no amount of money is worth the toll it takes on his health every time he steps into the ring. We don’t have time to drag this out,” Satang added.

“He’ll win. And this will all be over,” Nattawat said, shaking his head in frustration. “Again. Focus, Titicharoenrak!”

The car climbed back to the top of the hill and stood still for a few seconds, as if gathering itself — though in reality, Titicharoenrak was probably just trying to rein in his anger. He always lost his temper when something refused to work, and for half a day now, he hadn’t managed to tame this turn even once. On dirt, it was far more difficult. Nattawat had already made him start over at least two hundred times.

“What’s he waiting for?” Satang wondered.

“No idea what’s going through his head, but I’ll bet twenty he gets it this time. I know this guy too well,” the cipher smirked.

“You’re on,” Satang replied, bumping his fist against his. “I’m not sure he’s got it in him today. He looks exhausted.”

“Come on, baby,” Nattawat murmured, eyes fixed on the hill. He raked his fingers through his damp hair and pulled on his black bucket hat. “Get mad and just do it.”

Norawit wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm and tightened his grip on the wheel. He stared at the turn, calculating his chances one last time. If he failed again, he’d lose it and storm off. His patience had been hanging by a thread for the past hour. He slammed the pedal down — the Mustang roared in place, kicking up a cloud of dust, then shot forward with a deafening growl. Norawit breathed hard, hand poised on the handbrake, ready to take the damned corner this time.

Again and again, he made the same mistake: either rushing, afraid of flying off the cliff, or hesitating too long, never daring to commit. Which meant he had to catch that perfect moment right before the maneuver.

He sped down the slope, closing in on the turn, and waited. In his head, he counted the seconds until the point of no return. Usually, he began braking at five, then threw the car into a drift — but this time, he gave himself a few more heartbeats. He remembered the training session when he’d first managed to conquer a corner in controlled slide. Nattawat’s hand had been gripping his knee, stopping him from acting too soon. And now, when there was no sense in waiting any longer, he hit the brakes, yanked the wheel sharply left, and pulled the lever. His foot crushed the gas again, engine roaring back to life, hands steady on the wheel.

The Mustang slid beautifully into the turn, leaving behind only a conquered stretch of hillside. Norawit shouted in triumph, straightening the car as he burst out laughing.

“Yes! Fuck, yes!” he cried, exhilarated. “Damn!”

He saw Phuwin jumping in place, celebrating his small victory, and the proud smile on Nattawat’s lips beneath the bucket hat. Norawit sped toward them and spun the car dramatically, showering them in dust before stopping half a meter from his trainer. Nattawat blinked in surprise, arching a brow as he slowly looked up at him. Norawit leaned out the window, wearing a smug grin, and winked.

“I told you! You owe me twenty!” Phu cheered, ruffling Satang’s hair and slinging an arm around his shoulders.

“So? Am I a talented student?” Norawit asked, waggling his eyebrows.

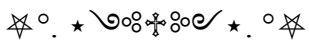
“Less arrogance, and you’d do even better. Too much aggression, not enough technique. You drive dirty,” Nattawat replied coolly, lifting his chin.

“But I’m still learning,” Norawit groaned, throwing up his hands. “Say I did well. That was cool. I followed your advice and waited longer than usual.”

“That’s enough for today. You need rest, and my car needs to cool down. Keep driving like this and you’ll wreck the engine,” Nattawat said, nodding toward the passenger seat. “Move over. I’m driving.”

“You’re not even going to praise me?” Norawit protested.

“I will, when you actually earn it,” Nattawat smiled, flicking his finger under Norawit’s chin.



The whole group, except for Pond, was slowly making their way along a forest trail, searching for a spot to spend the night. The place felt almost magical. The scent of greenery was so pure it made his head spin. Birds sang soft, intricate melodies, the only sounds in the air, like a calming lullaby. Dry branches crunched beneath their feet, and a warm breeze gently played with the leaves high in the treetops. It all reminded Norawit of scout camp — the hikes, the nights by the fire, the whispered scary stories. After everything he’d been through lately, this trip honestly felt like a tiny island of salvation. Despite the exhausting training, the atmosphere his closest friends created around him was like a free therapy session — something he desperately needed right now.

So many people believe that wealth is purely material. But in truth, it’s much closer than they think. Loved ones. Clean air. Daylight. A star-filled sky. Trees, flowers, sunrises, sunsets, the ocean, the wind, the soft patter of rain on leaves, the scent of freshness, and that sense of renewal you feel when you allow yourself to sink into peace — these moments are unique and priceless. And most importantly, they belong to everyone. Anyone can feel them.

Maybe that is life’s greatest value: simply breathing deeply and realizing that life itself is precious, only because it exists. Its meaning lies in this rare ability to perceive beauty, in everything the world gives us. Norawit rarely felt satisfied with his own life, but right now, he was truly happy. He had a family — not by blood, but no less beloved. All these people walking through the forest, following Pond’s hand-drawn map, meant more to him than he could ever express. Each of them in their own way, each uniquely irreplaceable. And at the very least, for their sake, he had to keep fighting through all the bullshit life threw at him. Because he wanted to believe that he mattered to them just as much.

“What’s on your mind, pretty boy?” Nattawat asked, catching his hand and lacing their fingers together.

“That my life is actually beautiful,” Norawit replied with a crooked smile.

“Wow,” he laughed, glancing at him. “And who are you, and what have you done with my boyfriend?”

“No, seriously. I complain all the time about how shitty my life is. And sometimes it really is. But in moments like this, I realize I’m just grateful to be alive. There were days when I thought there wouldn’t even be a tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“North,” Norawit sighed, nodding toward his brother, who walked a little apart from the others, slowly dragging his feet through the grass. “All my life, I believed that without him, there’d be no me. And there were days when things were truly awful. Kind of like now,” he added with a bitter smile. “None of us knows if we’ll have a tomorrow. That stopped scaring me a long time ago, but now I can see how much worse he’s getting. The guilt over everything he’s dragged us into is eating him alive. Look at him — he tears himself apart every single day. The fights are getting harder for him. He’s getting weaker.”

“And the withdrawal makes it even worse,” Nattawat said quietly, watching him.

“Yeah. I’m worried about him.”

“How is he even holding on?”

“Barely. But as far as I know, at least he’s clean right now. He promised me. And that’s a huge step toward a better life. He’s really trying.”

“And if he relapses?”

Norawit took a deep breath. “I’m scared to even think about it.”

“Honestly, this is the only place I ever see him smile,” Nattawat said. “Most of the time he looks lost and gloomy, but here he seems lighter. Being around people he loves, out in nature — it helps. Maybe we should do trips like this more often. Maybe it would make things easier for him.”

“You’re right. And it seems like he’s found someone who truly wants to help him now, and that matters a lot. Did you talk to Night about it?”

“I warned him not to hurt him. But I think he genuinely likes him. He seems to care.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Norawit said, slipping an arm around Nattawat’s shoulders. “It would be nice to see them together, wouldn’t it? I think they’d make a good couple.”

“Do we look that good from the outside too?” Nattawat asked with a grin.

“Yeah. Just as disgustingly cute that I might actually throw up. God, when you first met, I never thought you’d become this sickeningly in love. I already hate you,” Phuwin complained from behind them.

“Don’t be so openly jealous, cipher,” Nattawat laughed.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“No, you’re just yelling to the whole forest about how madly in love you are and how butterflies are multiplying in your stomach.”

“At least we talk about our feelings. Unlike you, who still can’t get the courage to man up,” Nattawat shot back.

“What are you even talking about?” Phuwin protested, lightly shoving him in the back.

“That little one stole them and is holding them tight in her manicured fingers,” Norawit said, pointing at Pahn, who was walking far ahead with Satang. “Just gather your courage and tell her you like her already.”

“I don’t like her,” he scoffed, then froze when both of them turned around and gave him skeptical looks.

“Sure,” Nattawat drawled. “And I’m not bisexual.”

“Well… maybe just a little. Five percent. She has pretty eyes and a great figure. She’s a cute menace and—”

“You’re in love,” Norawit concluded, rolling his eyes. “Just tell her.”

“I can’t,” he sighed.

“Why not?”

“She’ll reject me. It’s obvious I’m stuck in the friend zone for life. If she wanted more, she would’ve hinted at it.”

“Girls are weird sometimes,” Nattawat said, circling a finger near his temple. “They have a whole suitcase of complexities. They can hint so subtly we don’t even realize it was a hint.”

“And how would you know about girls? You sleep with a guy,” Phuwin laughed.

“I’ve been with both.”

“You never dated girls.”

“I never really dated anyone.”

“Oh, stop,” Norawit groaned. “You’ve never once seriously talked to her about it — that’s the problem.”

“I have! A million times!” Phuwin blurted out, then clapped a hand over his mouth when everyone turned to look. “I mean… I’ve told her straight up,” he added in a near whisper.

“No, you flirt, joke, hint. But you’ve never said it seriously. And that matters. If you feel something, you have to say it out loud. How is she supposed to understand what you’re going

through if you stay silent? Sure, she might turn you down. But at least you'll know you took your shot."

"…Damn. That actually makes sense," Phuwin admitted.

"Yeah, my boyfriend is very smart," Nattawat said proudly.

"But what if it ruins everything? We've always been friends," Phuwin said quietly. "I don't want to feel like an idiot around her afterward."

"If she values that friendship, nothing will change. But she'll respect your honesty. And maybe she'll see you differently. Show her your serious side. Everyone's used to you being the cheerful, carefree one, but Phuwin Tangsakyuen is much deeper than he seems. You have a beautiful inner world, I know that. You're my best friend," Norawit said softly.

"You're right… I'm just scared," he admitted, staring up at the treetops.

"Of what?" Nattawat asked, stopping. They waited for him and pulled him into a loose hug from both sides as they kept walking. "What could you possibly be afraid of? You're smart, handsome, crazy in the best way. Girls love guys like you."

"Of…" Phuwin hesitated, then sighed deeply. "It's stupid, I just… I don't know. I'm not that bold or fearless, I'm just—"

"An amazing guy. Way better than us in a lot of ways. You just melt in front of her, I know that feeling well," Norawit said.

"Oh yeah?" Phuwin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah," Nattawat echoed, smiling at him.

"Not in front of a girl, but…" Norawit sighed with a smirk. "Anyway, the point is, you're in love, and that's why you feel insecure. You're changing not because of her, but for her. You want to be calmer, gentler, more caring — and that's normal. So take the risk. If you tell her, it'll get easier."

"Alright. Maybe you two are right. I'll take your word for it, lovebirds," he smiled, looking at them in turn. "You somehow found the guts to confess and admit you were screwed. And your lives turned out pretty great after that. You'll invite me to the wedding, right?"

They laughed and kept walking, soon drifting into lighthearted chatter about nothing in particular. Satang followed the map with Pahn, while Night walked beside North. They lagged behind the others, moving much more slowly, deep in what looked like a serious conversation.

Lately, even though the younger Titicharoenrak had been smiling more often, he still felt terrible inside. The reason was painfully simple: fighting his addictions was exhausting beyond words. He was holding on with the last of his strength, but sometimes he couldn't control the sudden waves of irritation that rose out of nowhere, and that made him distant and withdrawn. In those moments, he tried to stay away from everyone, afraid of hurting them

with harsh words or reckless actions. Once he calmed down and came back to himself, everything would fall back into place, and North would become relaxed and bright again.

Night had started approaching him on his own during these difficult flare-ups. He would just talk, listen to long, tangled confessions, and try to soothe him. He was someone who had grown used to rough words over the course of his life; they didn't wound or offend him anymore. He knew that everything North said in those moments was nothing but pent-up negativity he desperately needed to let out.

"Hey, are we even going the right way?" Phuwin asked with a tired sigh. "How much longer do we have?"

"Looks like we're almost there," Satang replied, checking the map with Pond's markings.

"I get everything, but why the hell isn't our birthday boy wandering through the forest with us?"

"You just answered your own question," Pahn laughed. "It's his birthday, so he gets special treatment. He'll just drive around the forest and reach the campsite before us."

"I could've gone by car too."

"Just be grateful he didn't make us carry tents and backpacks ourselves," Nattawat said.

"He wanted you to properly enjoy the fresh air," Norawit added with a laugh, ruffling his friend's hair.

"Hey, cut it out," Phu groaned. "You know I hate that. And I get plenty of oxygen in LA."

"But you can't sleep with me in a tent there," Pahn said sweetly.

"Forget everything I just said. I'm absolutely thrilled about this trip," he declared, and everyone burst out laughing.

"Wait, it just hit me," Satang said, stopping short. "I'm sleeping with Pond?"

"I knew it, you two—"

"Shut up!" Satang shouted, pointing at him. "Don't you dare finish that sentence. Ew. No!"

"Okay, okay, relax, I'm joking," Phuwin laughed, raising his hands. "But it's fair. The tents are for two."

"Teams NorNatt, NorthNight, PhuwinPahn, and PondTang — everyone sleeps in pairs," Pahn announced.

"But he snores like a chainsaw, everyone knows that," Tang groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Maybe I'll sleep in a tent with Pahn?"

"Hey, no!" the cipher protested.

“Then in the car.”

“That ruins the whole concept of our getaway,” Norawit said.

“Damn it,” Tang sighed.

“Accept your fate. We love Pond the way he is, even if he snores,” Nattawat said.

“Yeah, even that flaw is survivable,” Norawit laughed.

“Shut up, I don’t snore,” Pond snapped, shoving him in the shoulder.

“Guys, do you hear that?” Night suddenly asked, freezing.

“What?” the Titicharoenrak twins asked at the same time.

“Water. There’s water nearby.”

“There’s a river here, you could hear it the whole way,” Nattawat said. “What’s new?”

“No, this is different.”

They all stopped and listened. Beneath the quiet hush of the forest, the gentle murmur of the river was still there — but now another sound layered over it, like water falling from a small height and breaking against stone.

“That means we’re close,” Pond had said their campsite would be near water. Maybe there was a lake.

“Wait… is that—”

“A waterfall!” Pahn gasped, eyes lighting up as she hurried down the trail.

“No way. A waterfall in Ojai?” Norawit said in disbelief.

“I’ve never heard of one,” Tang added.

“Hurry up, come here! I think we’re here!” she shouted, and they all followed her voice.

They emerged into a wide clearing by the riverbank, and what opened before them was easily the most breathtaking sight they had ever seen. The campsite lay in the middle of a broad meadow, bordered on one side by dense forest and on the other by a mountain slope. And crowning it all was the damn waterfall.

A real one — like something straight out of a Discovery documentary about tropical jungles — so stunning it made their mouths fall open in awe. It wasn’t especially tall, maybe ten meters, but none of them had ever seen anything like it before. The place itself felt like a slice of paradise. Birds sang brightly, the air was saturated with clean oxygen and the scent of pine, and warm sunlight kissed their skin and pierced the crystal-clear water of the river. It was so

transparent they could see the smooth stones at the bottom and tiny fish darting between them.

A quiet stream spilled down the rocky ledges, weaving through narrow crevices before finally joining the river below. Watching the wide, shimmering ribbon of water crash softly against the blue air and then shatter into countless droplets was mesmerizing. Each drop fell helplessly from that height, breaking into glittering spray. It was so beautiful that breathing seemed to stop on its own. The place felt unreal — enchanted, almost magical.

Only the locals knew about it, which was why Pond had brought the people closest to him here.

He wanted them to forget their worries and the exhausting rhythm of city life, even if only for a while. He wanted to bring their little family together and give them an unplanned escape before the big race — a breath of fresh air before plunging back underwater. He wanted them to savor the peace and beauty of his home. Moments like these were far too rare in their lives.

“Damn,” Norawit murmured, sitting on a rock by the river, eyes fixed on the waterfall. “You’re seeing this too, right?”

“Yeah,” Phu breathed, stunned. “Wow.”

“Me too,” Night said quietly.

“This is insane,” Pahn whispered. “Are we really in Ojai? That same town where people barely know what the internet is or what a water cooler does?”

“And where they refuse to build decent supermarkets that sell cold beer,” Phuwin added.

“That’s exactly why they don’t need another life,” Nattawat said, pulling off his bucket hat and raking a hand through his hair. “Why the hell would you need the internet when you’ve got something like this?”

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” North asked, sitting beside his brother. “This is unreal.”

From the edge of the cliff, water raced over the stone steps, clinging to the rock as if embracing it. By the middle, the flow broke apart into thousands of sparkling droplets, tiny diamonds flashing in the sunlight. The raw power of it drew them in, hypnotizing and enchanting all at once. It was both alluring and intimidating — its beauty and strength a singular phenomenon. Everything around them trembled with its voice. They said every waterfall had its own song, and this one seemed to whisper gently, like a mother murmuring soothing words into a child’s ear, filling the soul with calm.

About ten meters from the riverbank, the campsite was already set up. Pond was carrying supplies from his father’s old pickup, finishing the preparations for the night. When he spotted them, safe and sound, he grinned and lifted a hand in greeting. He didn’t interrupt their awe — just shook his head and laughed as they stripped down and started jumping into the water one by one.

“Pahn, come on in!” Satang shouted, surfacing.

“Nope,” she shook her head. “I’m not getting my gorgeous hair wet. Hair dryers don’t work in the forest.”

“I thought you were a rebel,” Nattawat smirked, sprinting past her before leaping off the ledge into the water with a flip, splashing his brother.

He swam underwater for a few seconds, then burst back up with a joyful yell.

“Don’t even dare me.”

“Would that work?” he asked, wiping water from his face.

“Not this time,” she grimaced.

“Beautiful, forgive me, but I simply must,” Phuwin sang out, scooping her up over his shoulder.

Pahn shrieked, pounding his back as he ran straight into the river and jumped in with her. They thrashed around underwater, and the moment they surfaced, she pounced on him, trying to drown him before he could even catch his breath.

“Now that’s more like it,” Nattawat laughed, playfully dunking his younger brother in retaliation.

“They’re just kids,” North said softly, watching them with an unexpectedly gentle smile.

“Wow,” Norawit drawled. “Coming from the oldest among us,” he teased, squeezing his shoulder. “I rarely see them this happy. Isn’t it amazing?”

“It’s so amazing it feels unreal,” North replied.

“I don’t remember the Jirochtikul brothers ever playing like they’re five again.”

“I don’t even remember them acting like brothers. But they’ve grown closer, haven’t they? At least it feels that way.”

“I hope so. Night means a lot to Nattawat, even if he doesn’t say it often,” Norawit murmured, watching him wrestle playfully with his twin. “He just needs to open the door to his heart for him a little more.”

“We’re really lucky with our older brothers,” North said quietly.

Norawit turned to him, and his heart clenched painfully at how deeply those words sank in. They settled right beneath his skin, filling him with such warm tenderness that his fingertips tingled. North rarely said things like that, which made it sound almost like healing. There was nothing more precious than seeing his eyes shine with happiness. Even for a moment, this trip had given him a sense of safety and home — surrounded by people who loved him exactly as he was.

Norawit opens his arms and gives a small nod, silently calling him closer. He always does that when he wants to give him all the warmth he has, when there simply aren't enough words to express what he feels. His little brother leans into him, lowering his head and smiling softly as he melts into those familiar, comforting arms. This man has always been his best friend, and more than that — he became both his mother and his father. North's greatest wish is for Norawit to finally be truly happy, and he promises himself he will never become a burden to him again. After all, the mess they are in now is his fault.

Norawit tightens his hold around his shoulders and presses a gentle kiss into his hair, the way one would with a small child. Right now, these fragile, tender moments are worth their weight in gold to him. Since his brother grew up, he rarely shows his vulnerable side, especially in front of others. But now, North simply closes his eyes and listens to the most beautiful sounds surrounding him: Norawit's heartbeat, the laughter of their best friends, the murmur of water, the rustle of leaves. He is home. Right here, beside them. And it doesn't matter that soon it will all end and they'll return to the city — to a reality where everything is painfully complicated. Even there, these people will always be beside him, giving him this feeling, and he has to learn to treasure it.

"How are you, little one?" Norawit asks quietly, stroking his shoulder.

"Perfect. I like it here," he answers, breathing in deeply.

"I don't mean that. I mean how you really feel."

"Honestly?"

"No more secrets," Norawit says softly.

"Like shit. And I don't even know what hurts more. Everything crashed down all at once. I feel completely worthless, to be honest." He frowns, his face darkening.

"Talk to me," his brother asks.

"You know, I've been talking so much lately, I hardly recognize myself," North chuckles, shaking his head. "But Night says it's good for me. You can't keep everything bottled up — you have to talk through the problems and the painful spots. He says a lot of smart things."

"And does it help, talking to him?"

"He helps. He's one of those people who knows how not just to listen, but to hear. And I can feel that he genuinely cares. When you feel interesting to someone, it becomes so much easier to open up."

"Guess it runs in the family," Norawit smiles, glancing at his boyfriend laughing with their friends.

"Does Nattawat make you feel the same way?"

"Yes. Our relationship was built on honesty and understanding from the very beginning. For some reason, it was so easy to open up to each other."

“With us, it’s more complicated — mostly because of me. He’s spent his whole life facing aggression and violence, and I’m the one who’s always been the source of it for others. I don’t even understand what he sees in me or why he doesn’t stay away. I’m cold, and every word has to be dragged out of me with pliers, but I genuinely like talking to him.”

“And what did you feel when he kissed you?” Norawit asks carefully.

“I nearly lost my mind,” North laughs quietly, straightening up and running his fingers through his hair. “It scared me. Not because I don’t like him — how could I not? It’s just…” He trails off, then exhales deeply. “I’m terrified that he might start feeling something real for me. Because I don’t think I’m capable of giving him the same in return.”

“Why? You know how to love.”

“It’s too early to talk about anything that deep. But when I look ahead, I realize that to love someone, you have to be whole. And I’m not. Part of me is just… gone. Dead. I don’t even know if it can be brought back. I’ve got too many problems — drugs, alcohol, emotional instability, and a whole lot more. Until I deal with all of that, I’ll never be normal. I don’t want to drag him into this mess. He deserves better than me.”

“But Night knows all of this and still stays,” Norawit says, frowning slightly. “I get what you’re trying to say, but you can’t decide for someone who they deserve. I’m far from perfect too, yet Nattawat found something good in me. Look at me — just a regular guy with a mild drinking problem. He can’t even stand the smell of alcohol, but he stays. I have nothing but problems, and he’s helping me solve them. Sometimes it’s hard to understand why we’re loved, because we’re used to thinking love needs a reason. But most of the time, there is no reason. People don’t love for something — they love in spite of everything. You just have to accept that.”

“There are so many reasons to love you. You’re caring, kind, gentle, and soft. I know that better than anyone. But I’m nothing like that. Nattawat is incredibly lucky to have touched your heart — because in the end, he gets all of that. He’s the lucky one. You fit each other perfectly, like two vessels pouring into one another whatever is missing to create balance. I’m happy for you. I see how you shine.”

“Let yourself be happy too. I know you’re scared. But if you don’t try, you’ll regret it. You really like him. The only problem is that you think you’re not good enough, but let him decide that.”

“I’m not good enough,” North sighs, then smiles faintly. “But damn it… I’m in trouble. I’ve got real problems because of him, and I don’t even know how to react to that.”

Norawit laughs softly, studying his profile. North’s eyes glow with a tender joy as he looks at the person who, for the first time in his life, has made his heart tremble with excitement. But slowly, the smile slips from his lips, the corners turning down.

“What’s wrong?” Norawit asks, frowning.

“I feel so guilty, Nor. And don’t tell me I shouldn’t — we all know it’s not true. This is my fault. My weaknesses. My stupidity. Instead of climbing out of the mess, I buried myself deeper and dragged everyone I love down with me. I put you in danger. Myself. And maybe Night and Nattawat too, because now they’re targets because of Lim. I hate all of this. And the worst part is, I can’t fix anything on my own. I fight like a madman, but it’s not enough. He was right. I’m brainless and pathetic. All I can do is throw punches.”

“Stop,” Norawit whispers, pain lacing his voice as he shakes his head. “Yes, you’re not perfect. You made mistakes, and now you’re in a difficult situation because of them. You’re complicated, and you’ve caused us a lot of trouble. But you are not pathetic, and you are not brainless. Don’t you dare think that. What’s happening right now is terrifying. And you’re not the only one who’s scared — I am too, little one. That’s normal. We’re facing someone with nothing sacred inside him. But if I win this race, it will all end. For good. And then…”

“No more trouble,” North whispers, nodding. “No shady friends. No alcohol. No arrests.”

“No drugs. No fights. No more of this crap.”

“I’ll change. More than anything, I want you to be proud of me. I’ll change for you, because I love you, Nor.”

“I can’t believe you said that so easily,” Norawit smiles softly.

“I have to value you more. I want to thank you every day, because without you, I wouldn’t even be alive,” North replies.

He points at Norawit, then at himself, then brings his fists together and moves them in a small circle, crossing his thumbs. Norawit understands immediately and smiles warmly. In sign language, it means: You and me — forever. It was their secret sign back when his brother couldn’t speak. No one else understood them, so they communicated this way until he could return to a normal life.

North takes his hand, lacing their fingers together, pressing his thumb gently against Norawit’s, sealing the promise like a vow. Those days had been unbearably hard, so hard they didn’t know if they would survive. But if they made it through all of that at eleven, could they really give up now? No. They had to fight to the end.

“And I love you too, Northie,” Norawit says, smiling softly. “We’ll get through this. Together, right?”

Time slipped by here without anyone noticing. While the others swam in the river, the Titicharoenrak twins built a fire so everyone could gather around it once night fell, and Pond cooked a delicious dinner. The sun sank quickly toward the horizon, and as it disappeared behind the treetops, the place somehow became even more beautiful. The sky turned a deep shade of orange, streaked with white and pale blue. In that light, the waterfall looked downright magical, and Norawit couldn't resist taking a few photos on his phone, wanting to preserve this day in his memory. Of course, he snapped several pictures with his friends too — and with the grumpy boy who protested at first but later asked him to send the photos anyway.

The atmosphere was unreal. The weather was warm and gentle, the views breathtaking, and the company the best he could possibly imagine.

Dinner, filled with laughter and endless jokes, flew by effortlessly. Everyone decided to drink — some more, some less. Everyone except the Titicharoenrak twins and Nattawat, who had never touched alcohol in his life. He simply laughed at his friends' ridiculous dances and stupid jokes, then suddenly disappeared somewhere. Norawit immediately noticed his brief absence, trying to guess the reason. Maybe he was uncomfortable being around drunk people, or maybe the smell made him nauseous. But the truth turned out to be far simpler than any of his assumptions.

He spotted Nattawat returning to his folding chair with a guitar in his hands.

"No way," Norawit whispered around a toasted marshmallow. "I'm pretty sure I didn't drink enough to hallucinate this."

"What?" Pahn asked, sitting beside him.

"Look. My hopeless romantic is about to hit me straight in the heart again," Norawit replied, nodding in Nattawat's direction.

"Natt!" she exclaimed.

"Oooh," Pond drawled, rubbing his palms together in anticipation. "Tell me you're going to sing for me."

"Your birthday is in…" Nattawat checked his watch, "…ten minutes. So sorry, no requests until then."

"Then what will you sing?" Phuwin asked.

"Something of my own," Nattawat smiled, settling comfortably in front of the fire.

Norawit waited with wild anticipation. He had wanted to hear him play ever since their date. Honestly, it didn't even matter what he sang. He just wanted to hear his voice. But the fact that Nattawat chose to perform a song he'd written himself, in front of the people closest to him, made the moment priceless.

He began to play, and everyone instantly fell silent, listening to the beautiful melody. It wasn't flattery — it truly was. His slender fingers moved effortlessly over the strings, weaving a calm, harmonious tune that made Norawit hold his breath in awe. He waited and waited for that first note, as if this weren't just a casual performance among friends but some life-defining audition. For reasons he couldn't explain, everything inside him trembled with nervous excitement.

And then he heard it — a soft, tender voice, humming gentle words. Goosebumps raced down his arms and spine, and his heart sped up to the speed of light. Nattawat didn't just sing well — his voice sounded like the chime of crystal bells, like an angel's song. The tone was so warm, so pure, that Norawit closed his eyes for a few seconds, savoring it.

When Nattawat reached the chorus, the melody shifted, rising into higher notes. Phuwin filmed him with a wide smile, his younger brother watched with pride and love, lightly swaying to the sound of the strings, and Norawit found himself utterly at a loss for words. It wasn't only Nattawat's voice or the melody — it was the lyrics. Their meaning slowly unfolded, and the song's message echoed in his soul with a tender ache as he realized it was meant for him.

Nattawat sang about a love that no longer trembles. It wasn't the kind of happiness that makes you feel like you can't breathe, it was steadier than that. Deeper. It was the kind of certainty that settles into your chest and stays there.

With every line, he wasn't begging for the moment not to end — he was declaring that it wouldn't. That this wasn't fleeting euphoria. That this wasn't a temporary high. He sang as if he had already made his decision, as if his heart had already chosen and there was no turning back.

He wasn't asking, "Will you stay?" He was saying, "I'm here. I'm not doubting this. I'm not doubting you."

There was something so gentle but firm in the way he expressed it, like someone holding your hand not out of desperation, but out of intention. As if he wanted the other person to understand: You are the reason I'm this sure. You are why my heart is steady.

"Let it sink deep inside your soul till you can't stop thinking of me anymore, I'll tell you I love you every day, Till the very last time we meet someday," Nattawat sang, before slipping into a gentle instrumental bridge.

The entire time, his gaze never left Norawit's. He saw understanding dawn in his eyes, as if the lyrics were opening an entirely new world for him. As if he were waking from a deep sleep and finally realizing just how profoundly he could make someone else happy — and that it was all true. Norawit had never known he could feel this good with someone. Nattawat called the world perfect and unbearably beautiful when they were together.

When the song ended, everyone burst into applause, while Norawit felt as though he were drifting beyond the edges of the universe. He was so overwhelmingly happy he didn't even know how to act. He could only stare at the reason for it all, smiling like an idiot, unable to form a single word. God, he loved him so much his heart felt ready to burst.

Norawit snapped back to reality only when everyone stood up and began singing, “Happy Birthday, Pond!” Pahn carried over a small cake dotted with candles, and the birthday boy’s eyes lit up with pure, childlike delight. He hadn’t expected a surprise like this — a birthday cake in the middle of the forest, right at midnight.

“Make a wish,” Pahn said, stopping in front of him.

“Damn,” Pond sighed, rubbing his eyebrow. “You guys are unreal. A wish? I didn’t even plan on making one. Honestly, I already have everything I need to be happy. I have you, cars, family. I do what I love, and I consider myself a lucky man. But there is one thing I want more than anything.”

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense,” Satang groaned theatrically, rolling his eyes.

“I want this race to end with your victory,” Pond said, looking at Norawit. “Not just because we all want to help North, but because it’s the greatest damn race in the world, and I want a driver from the Loop to win it. Only two people here are capable of that, and I believe in you, baby Gem.”

He blew out the candles, and everyone cheered, pulling him into a tight group hug. They ruffled his hair, Pahn kissed his cheek, and Pond laughed, shouting into the forest that this was the best birthday of his life. His joy, however, quickly turned into outrage when the cake smashed straight into his face.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, wiping frosting from his eyes. “What the hell?!”

“Sorry, bro. Payback for my birthday,” Satang laughed.

“Fine, I still love you. I love all of you, idiots. This really is the best night of my life. Celebrating my birthday with the best people in the world, in my favorite place. It’s unbelievable.”

Pond had never been more right. It truly was the most beautiful evening of their lives. They hadn’t laughed this much in ages, hadn’t felt so light and carefree in a long time. No one stopped to think that tomorrow might be different, that reality could be far harsher than the small, happy bubble they had created for themselves. Right now, the outside world didn’t exist. They danced around the bonfire, drinking on the move and singing along to the songs blasting from the pickup. No one managed to stay on the sidelines — even North joined in, gleefully dancing with Pahn, their hands intertwined. Barefoot on the sand, she moved quickly to the fiery rhythm, hips swaying in her short shorts, while Phuwin watched her with eyes full of hopeless adoration, downing straight gin from the bottle. He admired the way her long blue hair fluttered against the dark sky as she spun with her arms raised, the shadows from the flames playing gently across her caramel skin.

“Damn it, I’m a lost cause,” he whispered, exhaling deeply.

“I think now’s the perfect moment,” Nattawat said as he passed by, pulling Norawit into another dance. “Tell her.”

“I’m afraid I’m not capable of beautiful speeches right now,” Phuwin replied, lifting the bottle in his hand.

“They say it gives you courage. At least try,” Jirochtikul laughed, rolling his shoulders to the beat.

“Ah,” Tangsakyuen frowned, then winked at him. “You’re a genius. To hell with it. Worst case, I’ll just blame the alcohol.”

He took another big swig for bravery, set the bottle down, and marched toward her. Whether it was the alcohol or his own feelings, something finally pushed him forward — he could no longer hide them. He grabbed her hand, pulled her into his arms, cradled the back of her neck, and kissed her. Pahn struggled for a second, startled, then melted into the kiss and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Nattawat laughed, running a hand through his hair as he admired the sweet scene, then turned to the person whose arms were snug around his waist. Brown eyes sparkled with happiness, and the most radiant, irresistible smile he had ever seen lit up Norawit’s face.

All his life, he had believed that crossing the finish line with victory in his hands was the pinnacle of happiness. He chased speed, over and over, just to feel that rush again, convinced nothing else could compare. He was always in a hurry, always seeking more adrenaline, more euphoria — and how wrong he had been. This was it. This was his moment. Right here, right now. The reason for his happiness was holding him close, smiling at him like that, and suddenly nothing else mattered. It didn’t matter that truly happy days had been rare in his life; what mattered was that every one of them had been spent beside this person.

Much later, deep into the night, they finally went to sleep, pairing off into their tents. Sleeping in a tent was something new for Nattawat, and he kept shifting, trying to find a comfortable position. Even with a camping mat beneath them, his back felt every bump in the ground, every tiny stone. Sleep refused to come.

The dim light of the full moon filtered through the small ventilation window, making it feel as though they were lying almost under the open sky, while the distant murmur of a waterfall whispered softly in the silence. The moment itself was beautiful — the atmosphere, the stillness, and the peaceful presence of Norawit beside him. He wasn’t asleep either; Nattawat could hear his heavy breathing and the rustle of his sleeping bag as he rolled onto his back. Norawit turned his head toward him, raising an eyebrow when Nattawat sighed again and fidgeted restlessly.

“Have you never been to summer camp?” Norawit asked.

“No. I spent my summers at home, playing cards,” he replied, staring up at the small window and the sky beyond.

“Are you cold?”

“No, just uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, not exactly a five-star hotel.”

“And these crickets are driving me insane. How can anyone sleep with that noise?”

“I sleep next to you when you snore like a jet taking off,” Norawit said dryly. “People get used to anything, baby.”

“Shut up,” Nattawat muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Trust me, this is still luxury. If you’d ever gone hiking with a scout group, where there are no mats, no insulation, and you’re lying on tree roots instead of sand, you’d be singing a different tune,” Norawit smirked.

“You were in a scout camp?” Nattawat asked, surprised.

“Twice. It was amazing,” he smiled.

“I’ve heard it’s intense. Lots of physical training and stuff. What did you like most?”

“Rock climbing.”

“Really? Like, actual climbing?” Nattawat asked, eyes lighting up with childlike wonder.

“Yeah. We had a small climbing wall at camp, and on hikes we practiced out in nature. I was the best at it — always the first to climb and descend, pushing myself higher every time. It was incredible. In my group, I was like Alex Honnold.”

“Who?” Nattawat chuckled.

“A famous climber. His skills are almost unreal, he barely uses safety gear. He’s a legend, and for my shift, I was the Alex Honnold,” Norawit said with a grin. “After camp, I kept at it for a few more years, but eventually I had less and less time.”

“Weren’t you scared of falling? That’s pretty extreme.”

‘“Hey, we’re all going to die someday. Why not do something worthwhile before that?”’ Norawit quoted with a smile.

“Wow. Sounds like our life motto,” Nattawat said.

“And there were awesome discos on the weekends,” Norawit added nostalgically.

“Oh God, of course,” Nattawat laughed. “You probably stole all the girls, didn’t you?”

“Yup,” Norawit drawled smugly. “Even North wasn’t such a heartbreaker.”

“Was there at least one girl you couldn’t charm?” Nattawat asked, turning toward him.

“Yes,” Norawit said quietly, sighing as he stared at the ceiling. “One. Kendall Ehrman.”

“No way. How did she resist your killer charisma?”

“It was a rough phase for me. I wasn’t as good-looking as I am now. You know, I went through some serious transformations,” Norawit replied solemnly. “I’m stunning now, but back then my baby teeth were falling out.”

“Oh my God, you’re impossible,” Nattawat burst out laughing.

“Seriously, it was awful. I was missing both front teeth at the same time, lisped like crazy, and when I smiled I looked ridiculous. I had zero chances,” Norawit said, laughing along.

“I thought you were being serious,” Nattawat gasped, trying to calm down. “God, I haven’t laughed like this in forever.”

Norawit was one of those people who could always lighten the mood, who could make you laugh until your eyes watered without even trying. And he himself was so easy to make laugh. It felt wonderful that they were on the same wavelength, sharing the same sense of humor.

After a minute, silence finally settled between them as Nattawat caught his breath. Then he felt an intense gaze burning into his skin. He turned his head and found Norawit staring at him, unblinking.

“What?” Nattawat asked.

“What?” Norawit echoed.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because I’m admiring you.”

“You’re making me nervous,” Nattawat whispered, lowering his gaze shyly.

“Look at me,” Norawit murmured, gently brushing his thumb across Nattawat’s cheek.

He lifted his eyes again, savoring the soft touch against his skin. He rarely felt embarrassed — only with him. The sensation instantly brought back the memory of that moment in the locker room, when Norawit had been impossibly tender and sensual. His heart went wild in his chest, pounding so loudly it felt as though the entire world could hear it.

Norawit lightly brushes his fingertip over the boy’s temple and cheek, studying his face, then traces the line of his nose and the curve of his slightly parted lips. He examines him so carefully in the dim light, as if seeing him for the very first time. The mood between them shifts when the carefree smile slips from Titicharoenrak’s lips. He grows thoughtful, lost somewhere deep inside himself. His gaze turns pure, profound, and utterly serious, as though he’s memorizing something that belongs to him, trying to etch every feature into his memory.

“I’m so lucky,” Titicharoenrak whispers, blinking slowly.

“Why?” Jirochtikul asks, surprised.

“You know you’re the most beautiful person in the world, right? Your eyes aren’t just eyes — they’re an entire universe. They’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Stars? What are those, really? Compared to your eyes, they’re just pale, meaningless specks. When you smile, I can see your happiness reflected in them. It’s incredible how you can say everything without a single word.”

“Stop,” Nattawat murmurs, fingers gliding softly along his neck as he moves a little closer. “You make me so nervous when you talk like that.”

“It’s okay. Just breathe. You don’t have to be nervous hearing the truth about how beautiful you are. Remember what you told me? That you have your own way of calming down?”

“Yeah. Counting to five.”

“Does it help?”

“I think so. But with you, I lose all control. Nothing saves me from feeling like this when I’m with you,” Jirochtikul admits, looking at him with those wide, beautiful eyes.

“You know, I have my own way of calming down too. It never fails.”

“What is it?”

He takes Nattawat’s hand and gently wraps his own fingers around his index and middle finger, the way a small child would. The familiar gesture makes his heart melt all over again. Nattawat had noticed him doing this in his sleep on their very first night together, and ever since, it’s reduced him to helpless tenderness every single time.

“That’s so cute,” he whispers with a soft smile.

“Yeah. When I was little, I was afraid of monsters. When I slept next to my brother, holding onto his fingers helped me fall asleep. The presence of the person closest to me always calms me down. It used to be only North, but when he grew distant, I found my comfort in you,” Titicharoenrak whispers.

“You know, after the race, I said I trusted you ninety-five percent.”

“Yeah.”

“And I wanted to test you.”

“I’m ready.”

“But I don’t think I need to anymore.”

“I’m curious,” Norawit smiles, propping himself up on one elbow, hovering over him.

“You really want to take it?” Nattawat chuckles quietly, studying his face.

“Yes. It’s only fair,” he replies, kissing the tip of his nose. “You passed mine. Now I’ll pass yours.”

“Alright. If you insist.”

“I want to know what kind of trust test street racers have.”

“There’s something I want to tell you,” Nattawat whispers, gently threading his fingers through Norawit’s hair.

“What?” Titicharoenrak frowns, catching the seriousness in his gaze.

“I’m honest with you. I understand you. I trust you. And there’s something unreal pulling us together,” Nattawat breathes, his fingers nervously burying themselves in the soft pink strands. “It feels like you’ve gathered all the pieces.”

“Just gathering them isn’t enough. I still need one more thing,” Norawit answers.

“Yeah. I remember telling you that only when you collect them all, feelings appear.”

“Right.”

“But I realized I was wrong,” he says quietly, his gaze sliding over Norawit’s face, which tenses instantly at those words. Fear flickers there, the dread of hearing something he doesn’t want to hear. “I was wrong about them being necessary for feelings to be born. They appear much earlier. I understood that the moment I woke up without you. For the first time since we met, I realized my life had split into before and after. And I don’t want to remember what it was like before you. Norawit, I…” His voice drops to a whisper, and he closes his eyes with a shaky breath. “I’m sorry I don’t know how… I don’t know how to—”

“Shh,” Titicharoenrak murmurs, brushing his nose gently along Nattawat’s cheek.

He presses tender kisses to his cheekbone, then along his sharp jaw, and finally to his lips. Nattawat exhales softly, relieved, wrapping an arm around his neck. The kiss is so careful, so gentle, that it makes him want to drown in this fragile tenderness. Nattawat is trying to confess his feelings, but he can’t. He simply doesn’t know how. Words fail him, emotions overflowing too fiercely. And Norawit answers him with kisses, showing that he understands everything, even when Nattawat can only manage incoherent fragments.

“I love you,” Norawit suddenly whispers against his lips, then kisses him again, brief and soft.

Nattawat freezes, afraid to even breathe, convinced he imagined it.

“Say it again, please,” he asks in a trembling whisper.

“I love you.”

Norawit gazes at him without looking away for even a second, and Nattawat drowns in his eyes. He dives willingly into their depth, no longer trying to hold himself back. It feels like

the most beautiful dream. I love you. The words echo in his mind, and he wants to pinch himself just to make sure this is real.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“You’re afraid you’ll be the only one feeling this again,” Titicharoenrak says softly, brushing a few dark strands from his forehead. “No, baby. I love you. I wanted to tell you for so long, but I was scared of frightening you.”

Tears well up in Nattawat’s eyes, his chest tightening until he can barely breathe. His fingers tremble as he grips Norawit’s warm neck, clinging to him as if to anchor himself in reality. For the first time in his life, he hears those words meant for him. No one has ever said them. No one has ever loved him. And now that he finally hears it, his heart feels like it’s shattering, unable to believe any of it is real. He needs to know — desperately — that this is truly happening to him, here and now.

He slides his palm over Norawit’s chest and feels his heartbeat, fast and heavy, and it makes him shiver. His heart is racing because of him. Because of love. God, it’s real. He can feel it so clearly that tears threaten to spill, though he doesn’t know whether it’s from happiness or relief. He swallows them down, afraid of seeming weak.

“It’s okay, baby,” Norawit says, meeting his gaze, then lifting Nattawat’s hand to kiss each fingertip, one by one. “You don’t always have to be strong. With me, you can be anything. I’ll never tell anyone about your vulnerability. You’re mine, right?” he asks softly, a faint smile curving his lips. “And I’ll always protect what belongs to me.”

“The problem is, my weakness is you,” Nattawat whispers, holding his breath for a moment. “I’m terrified of losing you. Terrified to admit that without you, I don’t even know how to breathe. I’m scared to love you, do you understand? Because… because…”

“I’m not her, Nattawat.”

“I know. It’s just… God. I’m sorry.”

“Being afraid to love after your own mother broke your heart is normal,” Norawit whispers, kissing the mole on his nose, then cupping his cheek. “You don’t know what it’s like to be loved in return, but I want to give you that. Just accept it, okay? I don’t need anything back. No words, no actions. Nothing. I just want to love you. Let me.”

“Norawit,” Nattawat breathes, his voice breaking into a shaky exhale, as if he’s forgotten how to breathe at all.

He squeezes his eyes shut, unable to hold back the tears any longer. His lungs tighten with an inexplicable ache, his throat closing around a painful lump, his body trembling as if with chills. It’s impossible to put into words how happy he is in this moment.

“I know how deeply you feel for me,” Norawit says quietly, wiping away the trace of a fallen tear from his temple with his thumb. “You’ll tell me when you can. When you’re ready. It’s enough for me to feel it from you. Don’t be afraid. And don’t think you owe me anything.

Remember when I said someone would come who would drown you in love for everyone who never did? I want to be that person."

Nattawat pulls him closer by the neck and kisses him desperately. Only now does he truly understand what love is. No one has ever given him this feeling fully — but Titicharoenrak wraps him in it, like the warmest blanket, holding him close. He believes him. Every word. And he's endlessly grateful that Norawit asks for so little in return. All he wants is for Nattawat to belong to him. And thankfully, that's the easiest thing in the world.

So many words are burning on Nattawat's tongue, aching to be said, but it's as if he's physically unable to speak. Something keeps stopping him, keeping him from giving those words to the person who deserves them most.

Maybe Norawit is right. Maybe it's just not time yet. One day, that moment will come — the moment when he won't have to force himself, when he'll be able to say everything his heart is holding. But right now, fear grips him too tightly, fear of just how powerful these feelings are, and he doesn't know what to do with them.

No one ever taught him how to love. No one ever accepted his love when he tried to give it. That's why he hid inside his thick shell, built walls around his heart, and pushed everyone away. He lived by one unbreakable rule: no one would ever take his heart again.

But Norawit Titicharoenrak had a way of shamelessly crossing out every rule he'd ever made. And Nattawat knew that all too well.

Chapter 11: XI

Chapter Notes

enjoy :)

They spent another full day on this small forest getaway, savoring the solitude of nature and each other's company. It felt wonderful to forget about every problem and sink completely into a warm, family-like atmosphere. There was a strange sense that no one else existed on this planet but them. Pond's decision to bring everyone here had been undeniably the right one.

For Norawit, it was a chance to finally breathe freely and feel carefree. He gave himself entirely to Nattawat. Almost every second of his time belonged to him, and he tried to wrap him in as much love as he possibly could. There was also another, perhaps the most important advantage to this trip: he didn't have to worry about his brother getting into trouble again, because he was always under watch. And for North, this time was almost healing. There were no overwhelming temptations of alcohol or easy access to drugs here, like there were in LA. Even though his friends drank, none of them pushed him to join, unlike that awful crowd he'd fallen in with back home. These people cared about him, and he loved that. He felt important to them. It wasn't easy, but he fought his aggression and listened to what was said about Night. They began spending more and more time together, no longer afraid to sit side by side in plain sight, talking for hours. Sharing a tent brought them even closer. It was clear they had taken a small step toward each other.

Late into the night of the following day, the whole group finally made it to Pond's house. They were exhausted, but happy smiles lit their faces. No one had the energy to unpack, so their bags were left in a long line across the kitchen and hallway. Silence and peace filled every room. Everyone was already asleep — except Norawit.

He lay there, holding his treasure that smelled faintly of blooming cherry trees, yet sleep wouldn't come. Something deep inside refused to let him rest, a nagging sense of dread, and he trusted his intuition. Unfortunately, it was always right. That sudden anxiety had never failed him when it came to trouble involving North.

Thoughts spun relentlessly in his head about what lay ahead for him and his brother. How would they manage? Could Damian be trusted? Would he really let them go after the race? Norawit didn't trust him at all, yet desperately wanted to believe in his honesty. He seemed

like someone who didn't throw words to the wind, but damn it — this was Lim. Only he knew what went on inside that brilliant, unhinged mind of his.

Trying to distract himself from the foreboding and the heavy thoughts, Norawit began by putting the remaining food into the fridge, then neatly lined up everyone's bags along the wall so they wouldn't be in the way. He slowly sorted through his clothes, separating the clean from the dirty. The scent of campfire and forest clung to the fabric, and it made him smile at once. He remembered the past two days — unbelievably happy ones. But then his hand brushed against the gun at the bottom of his bag, and the warmth vanished instantly.

He pulled it out and held it in his palms for a long time, studying it carefully. Since the day he bought it, he almost never parted with it. It made him feel safer. Living as a paranoid who flinched at every sound and rustle was exhausting. Every time he was alone with his thoughts, fear crept in — but he never admitted it, not even to his boyfriend. He was terrified for himself, for his brother, for Nattawat — for everyone he loved.

He never said it aloud, but he was bone-deep afraid of Damian, or rather, of what he might do at any moment. He had seen that man kill twice. What could possibly stop him from making Norawit his next victim? He was too cruel, too unhinged — nothing would. That unsettling kindness Damian sometimes showed him was especially disturbing. It felt suspicious, wrong. Lim inspired fear, yet treated him with something like respect, or perhaps something else entirely. Norawit couldn't understand it. Kindness simply wasn't in Damian's nature.

There were no logical answers when it came to that man. Damian amazed him every time with his intelligence, cunning, cold-blooded calm, and cruelty. Norawit would expect one thing, only for him to do something completely different. That constant unpredictability was terrifying. It meant he had to stay alert at all times.

With a heavy sigh, he brushed his fingers over the cold metal of the gun, then hid it back at the bottom of his bag so no one would see it. He still hoped he'd get the chance to fire it at the bastard who had ordered his family's murder. That was the main reason he needed it — to find that piece of trash. He already knew it was Hwang. But who the hell was he? A criminal? A drug dealer? A killer? Just a psychopath? Someone his father had crossed so badly that they all paid for it with their lives.

Those questions had haunted Norawit ever since he learned the name of the person responsible. He tried again and again to remember where he might have encountered him before. How could an ordinary lawyer have become such a serious obstacle that a powerful criminal organization was hired to eliminate him? It made no sense. It felt more like personal revenge. Or maybe his father had uncovered some massive financial scheme? That was possible — people were killed for far less. The real mystery was where that evidence had gone, and what kind of information it contained.

Norawit dragged his hands down his face, fingers slipping into his hair, tugging gently. He needed to calm down, to stop spiraling, or his paranoia would spiral out of control. He didn't want Nattawat to worry. Nattawat would sense his mood instantly, and then he'd worry too. At least until they returned to Los Angeles, he needed to push all of this out of his mind. This was a vacation — one personally approved by Lim. Now wasn't the time to torture himself with these thoughts.

Suddenly, he frowned and glanced up at the ceiling, listening to the silence. Faint, muffled moans drifted down from the second floor, and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. Interesting. Either Pahn had finally shown mercy to Phuwin, or his brother was having a very good night with young Jirochtikul — because it was definitely not Pond and Satang. A sly smile curved his lips at the thought that one of the two obvious couples in their group had just become a little happier tonight.

He pulled a tub of Baskin Robbins ice cream from the freezer and headed to the kitchen island.

Late-night snacking was one of his favorite habits. It calmed him, distracted him from unnecessary thoughts. At home, his fridge was usually empty, so he ordered delivery. Here, even that was perfect — the kitchen was full of every kind of junk food. Thinking about home immediately brought to mind his small, fluffy friend, whom he missed terribly. It had only been a few days, yet he already longed to shower him with kisses, boop his wet little nose, stroke his tiny paws with their pink pads, and scratch his belly while he purred nearby. He missed him so much. The landlady had promised to look after him, and Norawit sincerely hoped that when he returned, both of them would be safe and sound. Jumu and that woman both had difficult temperaments, so getting along with either of them wasn't easy — and getting them to tolerate each other was even harder.

Norawit sits on the table with his legs dangling like a small child's, lazily swinging them back and forth as he eats ice cream with a spoon, savoring every bite. The kitchen is almost completely dark and empty, yet he doesn't feel lonely at all. Upstairs, in a warm, cozy bed, sleeps the person responsible for the erratic rhythm of his heartbeat every single minute. And it's comforting to know that at any moment he can slip under those blankets, pull him close, bury his nose into that warm neck, and feel like he's home.

That fragile, intimate conversation they had in the tent at night opened his eyes to so many things. First, he realized that Nattawat's feelings ran far deeper than he ever showed. Night had been absolutely right — Nattawat knew nothing about love, yet he knew how to love. Norawit felt it in everything he did, without a single word, and that mattered more than anything. And second, he saw just how hard all of this was for him. Nattawat had barely been able to breathe when he heard for the first time in his life that someone loved him — selflessly, fiercely, simply for existing. It was both terrifying and beautiful.

Norawit liked knowing he was the first to give him those incomparable emotions. And he truly intended to drown him in his love, because this boy deserved it more than anyone. Still, he was afraid — afraid of failing, of not living up to his promise. He didn't want to become yet another person who shattered that fragile heart. Deep down, Nattawat was already so wounded, and Norawit would never forgive himself if he became someone who caused him pain. Nattawat deserved the very best.

He flinches slightly at the soft creak of wooden steps and shakes off his thoughts. Nattawat enters the kitchen, yawning, running a hand through his sleep-tousled hair. In the darkness, half-asleep, he doesn't notice Norawit right away and heads straight for the fridge. He rubs his eyes, then drinks directly from the bottle.

Norawit shamelessly stares at his half-naked body, the spoon resting between his lips, a sinful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He really did get the most beautiful man in this damn world. Nattawat is breathtaking. God must have worked overtime the day he made him. Standing half-turned, Nattawat drains the bottle in long gulps, his sharp Adam's apple bobbing with each swallow, a sight so indecently attractive that Norawit can't help but sigh softly and swallow hard.

He's wearing only soft sweatpants, hanging low on his hips, revealing one of the most intoxicating parts of his body. The deep V-lines carved by relentless hours in the gym are sharply defined, guiding the eye downward in a way that leaves Norawit's mouth instantly dry and his blood rushing south. Every time he looks at him, desire hits him fast and mercilessly.

Nattawat slowly turns toward him — and freezes mid-sip, bottle still raised, lips wrapped around the neck of it. His surprised eyes light up with unmistakable delight. He exhales softly when he finally notices Norawit perched on the table in nothing but pajama pants, having clearly escaped from bed to indulge in ice cream.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Nattawat arches a perfectly groomed eyebrow, clearly amused by the way Norawit is openly staring, completely lost.

"Baby?" he asks softly, biting his lip to hold back a smile. "You okay?"

"Hm?" Norawit hums, slowly sucking on the spoon, tilting his head.

"You okay?" Nattawat repeats, stepping closer.

"Yeah. Of course," Norawit blinks, snapping out of it. "I thought you were asleep."

"And I thought you were lying next to me. The moans from Night's room woke me up. Where did you run off to?"

"Probably North," Norawit chuckles. "I couldn't sleep. Put some things away, and then…" He lifts the tub of ice cream and scoops another bite. "Couldn't resist."

"Just couldn't sleep?" Nattawat asks immediately, a note of concern in his voice. "You remember you can tell me anything, right?"

"I know. I'm fine, really," Norawit says, hooking his legs around Nattawat's waist. "So, how was sleeping in a bed? No crickets, no rocks under your back, no water noise. Heaven, right?"

"I appreciate my bed even more now," Nattawat laughs quietly.

"Did you mean my bed?" Norawit grins, sliding closer to the edge. "You basically live at my place."

"Then ours."

"Mmm, no. It'll be ours when you officially move in."

“Unlikely,” Nattawat snorts, resting his hands on Norawit’s thighs.

“What do you mean, unlikely?” Norawit frowns. “Sounds like ‘never.’”

“We won’t survive.”

“We’ve had zero problems so far. Or am I forgetting something? I’ve accepted your snoring, and the rest is totally manageable.”

“I wasn’t talking about you,” Nattawat laughs. “Your son hates me.”

“Then you’ll have to make him adore you. We’re a package deal.”

“And how do I do that? He still bites me at every opportunity. A demon cat. Satan personally sent him.”

“Jumu’s almost used to you. Keep trying. You’ll fall in love with each other,” Norawit says, leaning in to kiss him quickly.

Nattawat glances at the ice cream and notices that half of it is already gone. Such a sweet tooth. He remembers their date in Santa Monica, how Norawit had stubbornly refused to share even a single bite. It had been a matter of life and death, and no persuasion had worked. So grown-up, yet sometimes so childlike in the smallest things, and that only made him more endearing.

“Want some?” Norawit suddenly asks, scooping another spoonful.

“Oh, wow,” Nattawat teases. “Am I dreaming? Are you actually offering me ice cream?”

“Yes. We’re at that stage of the relationship,” Norawit smiles. “I even share my ice cream with you now.”

“Vanilla with chocolate chips?”

“Mmm, sounds sinful already,” Norawit nods, eyes fluttering shut.

“If it’s your favorite, then I want it.”

Norawit drags the spoon slowly across his slightly parted lips, leaving a glossy trace, then crooks his finger, beckoning Nattawat closer. Nattawat smirks, and in one swift motion, pulls him in by the hips, leaning forward. He grips the back of Norawit’s neck and drags his tongue lazily across his lips, teasing. Goosebumps ripple over Norawit’s skin as Nattawat finally kisses him, deep and slow, his cool, sweet tongue sliding inside. Nattawat exhales sharply. Damn. It’s the most delicious kiss they’ve ever shared, in every sense of the word.

Norawit responds eagerly, caressing his tongue, listening to his breath, feeling a hot palm glide over his chest. It’s just a kiss — but desire already surges through him, blood pooling low. His body reacts instantly, helplessly. Pulling back, he grins in triumph. He’s succeeded. Nattawat’s eyes are blazing, chest rising and falling fast, craving more.

“Good?” Norawit murmurs, arching a brow.

“I don’t know,” Nattawat replies hoarsely. “I didn’t really get to taste it.”

“Want more?” Norawit teases.

“Very.”

Norawit scoops up more ice cream and drags the spoon slowly along his neck, leaving a melting trail. Nattawat immediately leans in, licking a broad, slow path along his pulse, up to his ear. Norawit shivers, breath hitching, eyes fluttering shut.

Another spoonful lands in the hollow of his collarbone. Nattawat’s lips follow, collecting every drop, tongue tracing along skin, over freckles and bone, until he cleans it away.

“Well?” Norawit whispers, breathless. “Did you taste it?”

“No,” Nattawat smirks.

“You’re insatiable. Want more?”

“Always.”

“The ice cream?”

“You.”

Nattawat peppers kisses along his throat, teeth grazing skin. Norawit laughs softly.

“Wait. I didn’t offer myself as dessert.”

“I can combine my two favorite treats,” Nattawat murmurs against his jaw.

“You’re hopeless.”

“And you love it.”

Their kisses grow hotter, deeper, until restraint becomes pointless. Norawit feels Nattawat’s arousal pressing into his thigh and moans softly. Fingers tangle in dark hair, pulling him closer, surrendering to the heat building between them.

Nattawat finally breaks away, bracing himself against the table, breathing hard, watching with hungry eyes as Norawit smears ice cream across his own chest, licking the spoon slowly, deliberately provoking him. It’s impossible not to want more.

Nattawat is literally devouring him in every sense of the word. Norawit's skin erupts in goosebumps as he struggles to draw ragged breaths, eyes squeezed shut while Nattawat cleans up the evidence of his latest playful mess. That hot tongue glides excruciatingly slowly across his honey-toned skin, lapping away the sweet, chilled cream with hints of vanilla. He traces delicate circles around a nipple, and Norawit lets out a sharp gasp, head

thrown back against the ceiling. Those soft, almost purring moans send pleasant tremors through Nattawat's abdomen and make his hard cock ache with tension. God, he loves those beautiful sounds. He gently captures the nipple between his lips, stroking it insistently with his tongue before subjecting its twin to the same sweet torture. He smells incredible, like ripe watermelon, but tastes like vanilla ice cream. And damn it, it's never enough of this most delicious dessert. He wants more and more. Wants to lick and kiss every inch of him from that pretty brown head down to his toes. Desire clouds his vision as his chest burns with this overwhelming feeling.

Nattawat is drunk on this version of Norawit: hot, tender, playful, sensual. That dark gaze wanting more drives him absolutely insane. And those low whispers falling from those incredible lips—curses, sweet words, his name, moans and sighs—all blend into an impossibly sweet melody that makes him melt like that very treat on the perfect body beneath him.

Norawit pushes lightly against Nattawat's chest before sliding off the counter. He leaves more ice cream on himself this time, right on the defined ridges of his stomach, where it trickles down in smooth streams toward his groin. Without a word, Nattawat kneels before him, tugging down his pajama pants to save them from the dessert, then follows those sweet paths covering the tense muscles with his tongue. He laps at each trail, eyes closed in pleasure, fingers digging into Norawit's thighs. His lips pepper the taut abs with greedy kisses, moving lower and lower.

"Damn, baby," Norawit whispers breathlessly, grinning. "No one's ever wanted to eat me this badly."

Nattawat smiles, combing his hair back with one hand while licking his lips. He removes Norawit's pants completely, pushing them aside, then takes his erect cock and impossibly slowly circles the head with his tongue. So gentle and unhurried that Norawit shudders all over, eyes rolling back in ecstasy. He hisses through his teeth, squeezing them shut. The residual coolness makes the sensations especially exquisite and unusual. These caresses create an unimaginable contradiction of fire and ice, and fuck, it's unforgettable. No one's ever done this to him before. The combination of cool tongue and hot mouth creates sensations beyond explanation or comparison. And Nattawat clearly knows exactly what he's doing, judging by those bold, clever eyes that barely leave him. He grips Norawit's shaft firmly, licking all around it with satisfied moans, as if savoring the most exquisite treat.

Norawit lifts one leg to brace against the kitchen island's edge, continuing to eat his ice cream while watching Nattawat's enthusiastic performance. Those wet lips encircle his head, swirling along the frenulum, making Norawit's thoughts scatter. He groans deeply around his spoon, fingers tangling in Nattawat's dark hair. He presses him deeper by the nape as

Nattawat takes his cock fully into his throat. His hands, lips, and tongue work as one perfect instrument, driving him wild. Nattawat constantly varies the pace and techniques, making him breathe harder. One moment he's slowly enveloping the head with tender lips, caressing it delicately with his tongue; the next he's roughly and rapidly swallowing him whole, occasionally licking the swollen veins along the shaft erratically. Norawit feels himself sliding deeper between Nattawat's palate and tongue root, entering farther under the sounds of his own low moans and heavy breathing. He watches greedily as Nattawat slowly pulls out with a wet sound, before beginning a new form of exquisite torture.

Nattawat snatches the spoon from him and drizzles the melted ice cream all over his cock. Norawit grips the table edge until his knuckles turn white, unable to suppress a loud groan. The pleasant cold teases his nerve endings before being replaced by a warm tongue. The man slowly laps up the treat with broad strokes, then takes his shaft in his palm, lifting it upward. A stream of quiet curses escapes Norawit uncontrollably as he leans back, eyes closed, when Nattawat begins to tongue his balls while rhythmically stroking his entire length. His vision literally darkens with pleasure, his whole body straining from the overwhelming tension. He struggles with unimaginable effort not to come right now, but it's incredibly difficult when Nattawat so intensely pleasures his most sensitive zones.

Without breaking eye contact with Norawit, he licks, strokes, touches the frenulum, quickly runs his tongue over the head and its edges, all while drilling him with that greedy gaze. He makes such soft, sweet moans barely audibly, but they resonate as powerful electric pulses inside Norawit, who can only stroke his hair like an obedient boy. He lacks the strength to endure all this; he's being torn into tiny pieces and split into molecules. And the sight of hot Nattawat on his knees with his cock in his mouth—Gosh. Just that alone could make him come without any guilt. His skin is flushed, lips swollen and dripping with a mixture of saliva, lubricant, and ice cream, while those damn big eyes are a sinful abyss. Such wild chemistry swirls in them that it becomes frightening.

Norawit slightly leans toward him, roughly pressing his palm against the back of his head, and the tender lips instantly become incredibly firm in response. Norawit moans drawn-out, feeling their tight ring sliding along his entire shaft, and squeezes the countertop until his fingers ache. It's unbearably pleasant—he wants to scream at the top of his lungs, but he restrains himself with his last remaining strength, knowing they might be heard.

Quiet, slurping sounds escape Nattawat's throat as Norawit enters him, and fuck, that sounds so sexy. But when he notices Nattawat having trouble breathing, he immediately releases him. Nattawat gasps for air greedily but doesn't stop. He sticks out his tongue, then gently taps his cock against it and slides it back and forth, looking at him with an unblinking gaze. Those cursed eyes seem to bewitch, enchant, and pull him into their dark depth—some completely inexplicable magic. His damn lips engulf the head again, and then it begins to press against his cheek from the inside, stretching the delicate skin taut.

"Fuck," Norawit whispers brokenly, head thrown back, tightly gripping his hair in his fist. "What are you doing?"

Raspy moans escape his slightly parted lips as he moves his hips again, literally fucking the man's mouth. Self-control becomes impossible; everything happening intoxicates his consciousness so much that Titicharoenrak seems to forget where he is and who he is. This is pure madness. He dips his fingers into the bucket of ice cream, looking down at Nattawat. He slowly licks and slightly sucks them, then forcefully pulls his hair back and roughly squeezes his chin, making him obediently open his mouth.

Nattawat struggles to breathe as he watches a mixture of saliva and delicious ice cream stretch in a thin thread from those plump lips directly onto his exposed tongue. He swallows it all, tasting the sweet vanilla, while Norawit squeezes his jaw until his knuckles turn white, a bold smirk on his lips. He's satisfied. He loves how his boyfriend always agrees to anything without hesitation for their mutual pleasure. He leans toward him and kisses him so wetly, practically licking his palate and tongue, as if wanting to devour him like the most delicious dessert in this world. He pulls him by the chin, forcing him to rise from his knees, then abruptly turns him around.

Titicharoenrak fumbles to remove his pants and underwear, then seats him on the table. His wet lips kiss the man, leaving wet marks everywhere while he positions him more comfortably right on the edge. With great difficulty, he breaks the kiss and quickly spits on his cock, then circles the head with his palm. Nattawat groans heavily and leans back on his palms behind him, heels pressed against the table edge. His body vibrates with such tension that sparks of electricity seem to emanate from his skin. His nerve endings are so exposed that even the slightest touch makes him shudder and groan hoarsely.

Norawit continues to move his hand gently along his cock while unhurriedly running his tongue along the inside of his thigh up to his groin, then slides his lips down his leg, leaving multiple kisses. So slowly that Nattawat protests with a growl. He can't do this to him now, when he's already worked him up to the peak.

"Titicharoenrak, I'm going to kill you," he says with difficulty, breathing heavily. "Stop delaying."

Norawit smiles predatorily and leaves another long kiss on his skin, then pulls away. He quickly searches through his bag for lubricant, tossing almost everything on the floor, and returns to the man writhing with desire. Nattawat immediately bites his lips roughly, grabbing his neck. He spreads his legs wider, opening himself to him, and groans impatiently. He twitches all over when he feels those wet, lubricated fingers inside him, and his hand accidentally knocks some boxes on the table. They fall to the floor with a crash.

"Damn," Nattawat whispers and laughs softly.

"Be quieter, we're not alone in the house," Titicharoenrak smirks, moving his hand gently, and covers his shoulder with greedy kisses.

"Norawit," he groans, closing his eyes. "I'm trying. God, we're in Mrs. Lertratkosum's kitchen. I'll be so embarrassed in front of her later."

"And you're not embarrassed now, baby?"

"I don't know what embarrassment is in this minute. Faster, please," Nattawat whispers, sliding his lips along his cheek, and squeezes the back of his neck until his hand hurts.

"What a pervert you are," Norawit laughs, accelerating his rhythm.

"Just like you. God, what if they hear us?" the man whispers brokenly, moving to meet his hand.

"And you think they don't know we're fucking?"

"But not here. We've been behaving decently all this time."

"I won't say aloud what we were doing in our bedroom a couple days ago, in the shower, in the car, in the tent, and..."

"God, shut up," Nattawat laughs in response.

"Don't worry. We'll blame all the moans on our younger ones who are having fun upstairs."

"Baby," Nattawat whispers and kisses him impatiently, "please. I can't anymore."

These words, escaping in a hoarse whisper, are like a final plea. His eyes are so clouded with passion that a white, impenetrable veil has frozen in them. His hot breath simply burns, and his body trembles with intense tension. He needs him so badly, and this realization pleasantly warms something deep in Titicharoenrak’s soul. He pulls the man closer to the table's edge, and he immediately wraps his legs and arms tightly around him, clinging to him like a life raft in this madness. Norawit gently slides his lips along the delicate skin of the other's neck, covered with tiny sweat droplets and goosebumps, while his cock smoothly slides into him, and Nattawat moans at that same moment.

Too loud for the deafening silence that's settled over the whole house, but in this second, he couldn't care less. His head falls back, eyes closing as he savors that familiar, delicious stretch while the cock sinks into him inch by inch. He's drowning in this long-awaited sensation. His fingers involuntarily tighten in the hair at Titicharoenrak’s nape, his body filling with a heaviness that anchors him. Unthinkable. Every cell inside him tenses, muscles knotting. They're an obsession for each other. Both suffocating. Both burning. Both turning to ash from these feelings. So powerful it's terrifying. It feels like they have no end, no edge, and when you can't see the boundaries, that's the most frightening thing in the world. Their emotions have no visible limits—no depth, width, or height. They defy all explanation.

Titicharoenrak pushes into him with smooth thrusts, palms braced against the lacquered countertop, while Nattawat leans back on his elbows and captures his lips, tormenting them with filthy kisses. They still taste of vanilla, so incredibly sweet that another moan of pleasure is ripped from his chest. Seconds pass, or maybe minutes—it's impossible to tell because they've both disconnected from the real world. He moves faster because they're both holding on by a thread. He plunges into him deeply and rhythmically, trying to be quieter, but Nattawat continues to moan heavily into his lips with every thrust, squeezing his eyes shut against the overwhelming emotions. It's unbearable to endure. Everything blurs before his eyes. His skin burns with some kind of agony, and he wants to tear it off. There's not enough air. His hot breath melts everything in its path. His lungs burn with an inexplicable heat. All his insides clench with a sweet but painful languor. It's maddeningly good. So good his head spins from the pleasure.

"Nattawat," Titicharoenrak whispers with difficulty, eyes squeezing shut as his orgasm approaches. "I..."

"I know," the other replies, placing a palm on his cheek and breathing heavily. "I know."

"Love," he continues, accelerating to his physical limit.

"Baby," Nattawat whispers, thumb stroking his parched lips.

"You," Titicharoenrak finishes, opening his eyes and meeting a gaze drowning in love. "I love you."

"Koi no yokan," Nattawat barely whispers back, then kisses him so gently that goosebumps the size of the Grand Canyon ripple down Titicharoenrak’s spine.

It's the most fragile, lily-white, yet somehow desperate kiss between them. Titicharoenrak literally feels with his heart that he's pouring into it the full spectrum of feelings he possesses but can't yet express in words. He has no idea what the phrase means, but he's certain it's something exceptionally beautiful and pleasant. He'll ask about it later, because right now he's incapable of forming coherent words or questioning anything. All he can think about is Nattawat in his arms. Their shared pleasure, about to burst free from their bodies.

Titicharoenrak feels everything inside him turn over in a reckless hurricane. As if a tornado is twisting everything into a massive vortex, destroying everything in its path, and afterward all his insides collapse with his consciousness into some nirvana. A fierce heat shoots down his entire spine, and he seems to feel a powerful explosion inside him. He comes violently, practically growling gutturally into Nattawat's neck and spilling into him. Titicharoenrak, gritting his teeth, suppresses a prolonged moan yet continues with powerful thrusts.

He notices Nattawat tensing all over, eyes squeezed shut, his hand rapidly stroking his own cock. Titicharoenrak clamps a hand over his mouth, and Nattawat immediately moans into it muffledly, ceasing to restrain himself. His eyes burn so intensely, pleading with him, that he can't look away. He understands what's being silently asked, so he doesn't stop, instead continuing to chase his orgasm. Nattawat falls completely back onto the table, arching his

spine as he finally comes into his own fist. He shudders several times, cries out into Titicharoenrak’s palm, and then Norawit removes it and leans down to kiss him. He's trembling so hard, but Titicharoenrak himself is noticeably shaking from how incredible this all is.

"Oh my God!" Phuwin's voice comes from the kitchen doorway as he covers his eyes with a hand. "Whew! I didn't want to see this! I'm going blind! Are you crazy?!"

"Fuck off! Get lost, Phu!" Titicharoenrak groans, forehead pressed against Nattawat's chest, laughing.

"This is the common kitchen! Didn't you hear me coming? Have some shame!"

"Get out of here! Why the hell aren't you asleep?!"

"I didn't know you were in here! Fucking hell! Don't you have your own room, you perverts?!" he says, feeling his way back and parting his fingers to peek with one eye.

"Hey! Get out! Stop staring!" Norawit shouts, throwing a towel at him.

"God, I'm traumatized! I practically saw you fucking! I need a therapist! I even forgot why I came here!" he exclaims, quickly leaving.

His faint protests are audible until he reaches the upstairs landing and disappears. Titicharoenrak wipes sweat from his forehead with his forearm and laughs quietly.

"Oh my God," Nattawat groans, covering his eyes with a hand. "Now I'm embarrassed."

"Really?" the other smiles, one eyebrow raised in disbelief, and kisses the corner of his mouth.

"No," he replies, starting to laugh too. "Not at all."

The following days once again passed from morning till night at various training grounds. Norawit's brief rest was over — he couldn't forget why he was really here. His main goal was to learn how to handle a car as perfectly as possible. He had to become a worthy rival, because the competition at one of the most legendary races in the world was bound to be insane.

His drifting had improved dramatically. With every session, he felt more confident behind the wheel, almost instinctively sensing the exact moment when he needed to initiate a maneuver. Nattawat taught him different types of controlled skids and extreme driving techniques. Hearing criticism from him was never easy, but it was always fair and constructive. He never scolded him without reason, every remark was justified. With a professional eye, he spotted Norawit's weak points and carefully worked to correct them. He truly guided him, helped him, taught him, supported him, and little by little molded him into a real street racer, worthy of competing in a race he was determined to win.

One evening, after a particularly exhausting training session, instead of heading inside for dinner and a shower as usual, Nattawat stops him on the porch, gripping his elbow. With a mysterious smile and without a single explanation, he seats Norawit in Pond's father's Ford pickup, and they drive off. Nattawat looks excited and suspiciously pleased. For almost half the ride to an unknown destination, he's visibly nervous — biting his lips, constantly running a hand through his hair, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel out of rhythm with the music. Norawit is completely confused, but Nattawat dodges every question, offering only a playful grin in response.

He drives through the small, quiet town, smoothly weaving from street to street, thoroughly disorienting his passenger, who has no idea where they are. There are hardly any people around, even though it's only about nine in the evening. Ojai is peaceful and empty. After sunset, the locals seem to vanish, probably accustomed to a strict routine: early mornings, hard labor all day, early nights. They're simple, hardworking people, and now Norawit finally understands where Pond's character traits come from.

"Is it just me, or are you nervous, Natt?" Norawit asks, smiling at his driver.

"Maybe a little. Yeah, probably," Nattawat admits, that strange smile returning.

"So where are we going?"

"I already told you. You'll find out soon."

“At least give me a hint,” Norawit whines, stretching the words like a child begging for sweets. “I’m dying of curiosity. Is it another training session?”

“We just came from one, so no.”

“Are you taking me to see a nice view?”

“No. How cliché,” Nattawat laughs.

“Damn it,” Norawit sighs, ruffling his hair. “This suspense is killing me. And why are we in this truck? I thought you and the Mustang were inseparable.”

“It’s necessary,” he replies shortly, leaving even more questions hanging in the air.

“You’re impossible,” Norawit mutters, offended.

“So impatient to find out?”

“I hate not knowing things. It scares me, so I get really nervous.”

“Five percent,” Nattawat says, slowly bringing the truck to a stop.

“Five percent?” Norawit blinks, peering out the window. All he sees are closed shops and quiet residential houses. “I’m trying to figure out where you brought me.”

“We’re not there yet. You’ll drive the rest of the way. And right now, you’re going to pass my trust test. You wanted that, remember?”

“Oh. So that’s your plan,” Norawit laughs, shifting eagerly in his seat. “And what does it involve?”

“You’ll be surprised.”

They get out and switch places. Nattawat settles into the passenger seat while Norawit takes the wheel. He immediately tries to adjust to the unfamiliar vehicle, checking the side mirrors — he’s never driven something this big before. It feels strange, as if he’s sitting several feet above the ground, like in a massive truck. The pickup is bulky and not very maneuverable, and that makes him genuinely nervous. He’s grown used to sports cars — they were nimble and responsive. But this is his first time driving a pickup, and it already feels like a challenge.

Nattawat fastens his seatbelt and exhales deeply. Norawit narrows his eyes at him suspiciously. He hadn’t worn one the entire drive, and now suddenly he’s worried about safety? Before Norawit can make sense of it, Nattawat pulls a blindfold from his pocket.

No.

There’s no way.

“Yes,” Nattawat nods, as if reading his thoughts.

“No,” Norawit shakes his head.

“Yes. That’s the test. Blind driving, under my guidance.”

“Are you street racers insane?”

“And bikers aren’t?” Nattawat laughs.

“This isn’t a race, right?”

“Don’t overestimate your skills. You’re nowhere near crazy enough for that yet. No, it’s not a race. You just need to get us to our destination. I’ll guide you.”

With that, he ties the blindfold over Norawit’s eyes.

“God,” Norawit whispers, gripping the steering wheel. “I really hope we survive. I’m way too young to die.”

“Let’s go, baby.”

A smile spreads across Norawit’s lips at the familiar nickname. He exhales several times, trying to calm himself. Of course he can do this. Nattawat is right beside him. Everything will be fine.

He finds the ignition by touch and starts the engine. But the moment it roars to life, his confidence shatters. It feels like he’s behind the wheel for the very first time. He knows the theory, but in practice he’s almost blind. Still, he trusts Nattawat. He just has to listen and be careful with the speed. Better to crawl there for two hours than rush and kill them both.

“Good. Keep it straight. We’re not going far, so this won’t last long,” Nattawat says, soothingly stroking his thigh.

It helps a little, but Norawit is still so nervous he feels sick. His heart pounds so loudly it echoes in his ears. He moves the gear lever by memory and presses the pedals carefully.

“Easy on the gas. We’re in no hurry. Now slowly turn left.”

“Holy shit,” Norawit mutters, but turns the wheel. “Am I even staying on the road? Don’t be silent. Tell me I’m not heading straight into a pole. I need to know I’m doing this right.”

“You’re panicking,” Nattawat says calmly, lightly steadying the wheel. “Gentler. Smoother.”

“Of course I’m panicking. I’m driving blind for the first time in my life. You can see everything. I can’t.”

“A little more… good. That’s it. We’re on the road. The poles are far away,” Nattawat chuckles softly, completely in control.

“Don’t laugh, I’m scared!” Norawit snaps.

“You’re adorable.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Ridiculously cute.”

“Stop teasing me. Tell me what’s happening, I’m about to lose it.”

Nattawat laughs again, nose scrunching as he watches the road.

“Okay, another left turn. Carefully.”

“Are you kidding me?! Why didn’t you choose a simpler route? My hands are shaking!” Norawit groans, taking a few deep breaths.

“You’re doing great. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry, he says,” Norawit snorts nervously. “Why would I worry? I’m just driving blind, no big deal.”

“I faced my fear and got on your bike, remember?”

“That’s different. I could see where I was going and control the situation.”

“And now I’m controlling it. Trust me.”

“You’re insane.”

“Who isn’t?”

“I hate you, you know that? I hate you so much right now I could kill you for this test. I already regret agreeing. Never again. You people are completely unhinged.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Nattawat laughs. “You’ll get us there, and that’s it. No more tests. You wanted this.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think it would be like this,” Norawit says, gripping the wheel tighter. “I don’t want to die like this. Not at all. I’m young. You’re young. I still haven’t done so many things. And I have Jumu at home. What, he’ll be an orphan?”

Nattawat smiles softly, doing everything he can to support him. Just like on the motorcycle, everything now depends on teamwork. Norawit is panicking, it’s obvious. Not because he doesn’t trust Nattawat, but because he’s terrified of failing while having no visual control over the situation. The unknown frightens him, and so does the fact that so much of what happens now depends entirely on someone else.

In his life, he was usually the one in control. He trusted himself, his instincts, his senses. But now, it was incredibly difficult for him to rely on someone else and let them guide him through the task at hand — getting safely to their destination. For the first time, he had to listen to another person in order to get out of trouble. Norawit was terrified that something

might go wrong because of him. Afraid he might hurt Nattawat, other people, or himself. Nattawat had never seen him so lost behind the wheel before. His panic kept growing, and those frayed nerves only made everything harder. He needed steady support, someone who could calm him down. He could have passed this test easily; he just needed a reliable anchor in that moment, and Nattawat was ready to become it without hesitation.

“Hey, baby,” he whispers gently, stroking his forearm. “You’re not alone. I’m right here with you, okay? Just trust me. I’m trusting you too, sitting in a car with a blind driver. Right now, I’m your eyes. Whether everything turns out fine depends on both of us, not just you. Trust me and listen to me. If you fall, I’ll catch you. If you fly, I’ll fly with you. We’re one. Whatever happens, we face it together. There’s no me without you, do you hear me? Ask yourself again — do you trust me?”

“Completely,” Norawit answers at once, gripping the steering wheel.

“And I trust you. Just calm down. You’re doing great. Breathe out and turn right.”

Titicharoenrak inhales deeply and obediently turns the wheel, smoothly keeping the gas steady. Nattawat’s words soothe him almost instantly. It’s astonishing how much strength there is in the words of someone you love, spoken at the right moment. Especially when, not so long ago, he’d said he could rely only on himself — and now he was entrusting his life to another. That kind of trust was priceless. Perhaps the most precious gift he could ever receive.

“Perfect. You’re doing amazing. Keep it straight, we’re almost there,” Nattawat says, watching him with a wide smile.

Formally, the test was only now complete, but Norawit had earned his trust long before this moment. Once again, because of him, Nattawat had crossed his own inner boundaries. He never ceased to amaze him. The most extraordinary person he had ever met. Despite the storm of panic inside, Norawit managed to steady himself and listen. The support he received at the right time saved him. He drove slowly and carefully, following every instruction without questions or hesitation, showing that he now relied on Nattawat completely. And for Nattawat, that meant everything.

“Last turn to the left. There’ll be a downhill slope here. Easy,” he says, eyes on the road.

“Am I doing okay?” Norawit asks, following the direction.

“Yeah. Now slow down. A little to the right,” Nattawat says, placing his hand over Norawit’s and looking toward the parking area through the windshield. “Perfect. Brake. We’ll stop here. Back up a little.”

“We’re here?” Norawit asks cautiously. “And we’re alive?”

“Yes. You did great. Jumu won’t be an orphan,” Nattawat laughs. “A bit more back.”

“Oh my God,” Norawit exhales tensely, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“That’s it. Stop. Perfect. We’ve arrived.”

“Really?”

“Really. Relax, baby,” Nattawat laughs again and kisses his cheek. “Don’t take off the blindfold yet.”

“You’re full of surprises today, Natt,” Norawit says, turning off the engine.

Nattawat steps out of the car, circles it, opens the driver’s door, and takes Norawit’s hand to help him out. His fingers are slightly cold and trembling from nerves, so Nattawat strokes them gently to calm him. After a few steps, they stop, and Norawit lets out a relieved breath. Nattawat moves away for a moment, asking him to wait a couple of minutes.

During that time, Norawit tries to listen closely to the sounds around him, hoping to guess where they are. All he hears are crickets, some quiet movements from Nattawat nearby, and distant voices. It’s hard to tell where he’s been brought. The air smells fresh and green, like the whole town. Calm. Peaceful. They’re clearly somewhere in nature, yet not far from civilization, since they drove along city streets. Cool air fills his lungs, and a soft breeze brushes his arms, sending pleasant shivers across his skin. He shivers lightly — and then Nattawat takes his hands again, and his heart instantly starts to race.

“Ready?” Nattawat asks.

“For what?” Norawit replies warily.

“To have a small dream come true.”

“Oh God, just do it already. I’m dying of curiosity.”

Nattawat carefully removes the blindfold. Norawit blinks, rubbing his eyes as they adjust to the light, then slowly looks around.

Oh my God.

A drive-in movie theater.

He brought him to an open-air cinema.

Every time Norawit imagined this, he saw a massive screen standing in the middle of an empty field near a forest or park, rows of vintage cars, the soft hum of a projector in the night. People sitting on car roofs, couples kissing, groups of friends laughing. The smell of popcorn and the unmistakable spirit of 1980s America. And now, right in front of him, was almost exactly what he had dreamed of for years.

On a huge field resembling an old stadium, dozens of cars of all makes and eras were parked in neat rows facing a giant white screen where the movie would soon begin. Behind it rose the mountains of Ojai, bathed in the glow of evening. The moon climbed slowly into the sky, its light mingling with the dim glow of a few roadside lamps. It was more than enough to reveal the breathtaking beauty of the place. The atmosphere was so magical it stole his breath

for a moment. Seeing a long-held dream come true, something he'd known only from movies, felt unreal.

Norawit lifts his head and gazes in awe at tiny flickers of light dancing in the darkness.

Fireflies.

They were everywhere, glowing in the grass so thickly it felt as though someone had released them on purpose, just to create this spellbinding scene.

"This is… but… how did you…" he stammers.

"I found out that your idea of a perfect date is an outdoor movie," Nattawat says, nodding toward the screen. "So I wanted to surprise you. Since I'm not great with words about my feelings, maybe I can show you with actions how much you mean to me. I've never planned a date for anyone before. I'm nervous. I don't know how you'll react."

"I dreamed about this for years," Norawit whispers, still taking it all in. "This is insane. You really surprised me. It's unreal."

"But that's not all. What do you need for a good movie night?" Nattawat asks shyly, a tentative smile on his lips.

"Good company, I guess?" Norawit laughs.

"Exactly. I'll take care of that," Nattawat says, kissing him quickly. "And you need a comfortable spot, right?"

"I think so," Norawit replies, frowning in curiosity.

Nattawat turns him toward the back of the pickup, and Norawit gasps in amazement.

In the open cargo bed, Nattawat had created an entire cozy nest for them. Now it made sense why he chose this truck. Soft pillows, blankets, fluffy throws for warmth and comfort. It looked impossibly inviting — all Norawit wanted was to crawl in and start the movie. There were sweets, pizza, buckets of popcorn, and cups of soda. Every tiny detail had been thought through to make this night unforgettable.

Norawit shakes his head in disbelief, his heart melting at the sheer romance of it all. How did he even know? He'd guessed everything — even the flavor of his favorite popcorn. Caramel. Its sweet scent drifted through the air. It was unbelievable.

"This is… damn," Norawit whispers, exhaling softly. "I never thought someone would do something like this for me."

"Do you like it?" Nattawat asks carefully.

"Are you kidding? It's a fairytale. You thought of everything. Every detail, just to amaze me. You're incredible," Norawit says, turning to him.

“I’m so glad you like it. We’re watching Spirited Away,” Nattawat says, letting out a relieved breath.

“No,” Norawit groans, shaking his head. “You couldn’t have known. The drive-in, the car, the sweets, caramel popcorn, my favorite movie. It’s too perfect. Who told you?”

“North,” Nattawat admits with a grin, shrugging. “He said that was your perfect date. I asked him what I could do to make you happy, something you’d remember forever. He told me it’s been your dream since summer camp.”

“I can’t believe it. It feels like a dream,” Norawit says, stepping closer and kissing him.

The kiss is full of gratitude he can’t put into words. Everything about this feels too magical to be real. It’s hard to believe someone went to such lengths just for him. He kisses Nattawat gently and pulls him close, holding him as if he’s the most precious treasure in the world.

It was the best evening of his life.

No one had ever taken him on a date before. And now his heart felt pierced straight through, overwhelmed by emotion. His body trembled with joy and that dizzying flutter in his chest. He was unbearably happy, feeling like the very center of the universe.

They settle comfortably into the pickup as the screening begins. Familiar scenes flicker across the screen, casting soft shadows over their faces. Norawit truly loves this film — he’s watched it so many times in his life that he knows entire episodes and lines by heart, silently repeating them along with the characters. He cherishes it for its depth and layered storytelling; the complex personalities make him empathize, reflect, and feel deeply. That’s what makes the story captivating not just for children, but for grown men like him, too. Even though he’s seen it a hundred times, he still wants to relive every emotion all over again, and it never grows old. At first glance, it seems like an ordinary anime, but its meaning runs far deeper. It feels like a reflection of the harsh realities of the modern world. The story vividly exposes society’s greatest afflictions: the worship of money and a consumerist mindset. And the saddest truth is that people who cannot restrain their own desires eventually lose their humanity, turning into real monsters.

At this point in his life, Norawit feels like Chihiro from the story — lost, alone, trapped in a frightening world she doesn’t understand, surrounded by chaos and endless obstacles on the way to true happiness. She lost her family and fought desperately to save them, just as he fought to save his brother, who had foolishly ended up in a hopeless situation. His brother had been destroyed by one of those very people consumed by power and stripped of all human decency. And just like Chihiro met Haku, Norawit met Nattawat. He became his guide through this strange, unfamiliar world, the way Haku became her guiding star. He helped him survive, helped him escape the darkness, and Norawit desperately hoped that his own story would have a happy ending too.

“I had no idea a place like this existed,” Norawit murmurs, resting his head on Nattawat’s shoulder as he eats popcorn.

“Honestly, I put this together in just a few days. They haven’t shown movies here in a long time, but it was worth it,” Nattawat replies with a proud smile.

“You did all this?”

“Yeah.”

“For me?” Norawit asks shyly.

“Why does that surprise you?”

“I don’t know. I guess… the idea that someone would do something like this just for me. You’re the first.”

“We were supposed to have the place to ourselves, but I could only arrange it if they let the locals come too.”

“I don’t mind them being here on our date. It actually makes it feel even more special,” Norawit smiles, breathing in the clean night air.

“If you only knew how happy I am that you like it,” Nattawat says, gently kissing his hair, which now smells faintly of cherries.

“I think this might be the most beautiful day of my life.”

“I’d be lying if I said I’d had anything better,” Nattawat admits quietly. “More spectacular? Definitely. Nothing will ever top that night in Santa Monica. But this…” He exhales softly. “This is something else.”

“Cozier,” Norawit says.

“Yeah. Exactly.”

“Like it’s just the two of us in the entire universe, even though there are people all around.”

“I feel that too. Just you and me in the whole world.”

For several minutes, they watch in silence. Norawit listens to the restless beat of Nattawat’s heart and closes his eyes, savoring the moment. His soul feels like an overflowing vessel. Today, this person has given him so many different emotions that they spill over the edge. Not long ago, he could hardly believe he would ever feel something like this — and now it’s real.

“I’m so happy, Nattawat,” Norawit whispers, watching the screen.

“And I’m even happier,” Nattawat smiles, taking his hand and weaving their fingers together.

“Thank you for giving me this feeling. I haven’t felt it in so long.”

“What made you happy the last time, before you met me?” Nattawat asks.

“I don’t know… it’s hard to remember,” Norawit sighs after a moment. “My mom’s laughter. Spending time with her. Playing football with my dad.”

“So your parents were the reason for your happiness,” Nattawat concludes softly, stroking his thumb across Norawit’s warm palm.

“Yeah. And then I stopped thinking about it. I barely thought about myself or my own feelings at all. I only worried about my brother.”

“I understand why you want revenge on the person who took all of that from you. I never really had a family, but when I lost my mother, it was like all the life drained out of me. Things were difficult with her. She didn’t love me the way a mother should, but I still want to believe that, deep down, I mattered to her. Before she started drinking heavily, she was gentle and caring. I just barely remember it — I was too young.”

“So you think she was a good person, even if she wasn’t the best mother?”

“Yes. I think she just wasn’t strong enough to survive what she went through. She met someone terrible who broke her. That’s all.”

“That’s like how Night still loves your father, despite everything. Maybe he sees something good in him — something you can’t.”

“Yeah. You’re right. That’s why I don’t judge him, even if I don’t fully understand. We’re just looking at the same road from opposite sides. But the truth is, people grow attached to those who play a central role in their lives. That doesn’t mean they deserve our love. Our parents made the greatest mistake — they forgot about us. So I don’t think they’re worthy of it.”

“Then who is?” Norawit whispers, staring ahead, lost in thought. “If not the ones who gave us life?”

“The one who makes you feel special. The one who can make you happy. The one who will hold your heart gently in their hands and cherish it with boundless love in return.”

“For me, that’s you.”

“And for me — it’s you,” Nattawat replies, kissing his knuckles.

“I love you,” Norawit whispers.

“Koi no yokan,” Nattawat says softly, smiling tenderly.

“What does that mean?” Norawit asks, lifting his head from his shoulder and gazing into his glowing brown eyes. “You’ve said it before, but I never asked.”

Nattawat smiles, brushing a few brown strands from his forehead, then leans in for a gentle kiss. His thumb caresses Norawit’s cheek as he softly presses their lips together, tasting caramel, feeling utterly happy.

“I can’t put into words what I feel for you — it’s incredibly hard for me. Every time I try, it’s like I freeze. I don’t know why. You mean so much to me. So when you say that you…” Nattawat trails off, exhaling softly, “I just can’t stay silent. It would be cruel. You need to know that I feel a whole storm of emotions for you, even if I can’t express them.”

“You don’t have to, baby. I feel it without words,” Norawit whispers, kissing the corner of his lips. “I understand.”

“And I’m grateful for that. But I want to say something now, because it’s honest. In Japan, that phrase means ‘the premonition of love.’ I think it suits us perfectly. We didn’t fall in love at first sight — it was more like love at second glance. When you meet someone and, deep in your soul, you just know that you will fall for them, no matter what. When I met you, I understood it wouldn’t happen instantly — I’m not someone who dives in headfirst. But I knew it was inevitable. I knew I was destined to fall in love with you. You’re my koi no yokan — my premonition of love. I realized it sitting on the edge of your bed, watching your drunk eyes slowly close. I fought my feelings for so long, denied them, but I don’t want to anymore. You’re mine. And you stole my heart, Norawit Titicharoenrak.”

“That’s beautiful. There’s no more romantic confession than that,” Norawit whispers with a smile.

He pulls him closer by the neck and kisses him tenderly. It was a truly perfect evening: a beloved movie beneath a full moon, and the most beautiful confession of love one could ever hear — from someone who had never loved anyone so deeply before.

The drive back after a date like that felt unbearably unwanted, painfully difficult. A quiet sadness spread through Nattawat’s body as he watched the dividing line slide beneath the headlights on the dark road. The feeling wrapped around him gently, carefully pulling him back into reality from the fairytale he had managed to create for the most important person in his life.

He stopped in front of Pond’s house and cut the engine, but didn’t rush to get out. He didn’t want to. He just wanted to stay inside this cocoon of happiness for a few more seconds — there was so little of it in their lives. Every time they were finally alone, someone always intruded, but tonight had been perfect. Slowly, Nattawat leaned back in his seat and turned his head toward the passenger side. A soft, lovestruck smile immediately touched his lips when he noticed that Norawit had fallen asleep.

He was exhausted. All his strength went into preparing for the race, and it drained him completely. But every effort was worth it, he was getting better and better. And even though his teacher almost never praised him, he worked just as hard as he had on the very first day. Titicharoenrak was resting against the seat, his head tilted slightly to the side. A few strands

of soft brown hair hung loosely, tousled by the gentle wind. His lips looked so tender and soft in that moment that Nattawat ached to cover them in countless delicate kisses.

So vulnerable. Like a defenseless child you want to pull close and shield from the entire world. So fragile. His sleep had to be protected at all costs — he allowed himself so little rest. He was too strong, someone who never permitted himself weakness. So peaceful. As if he radiated some kind of angelic light. He slept so sweetly that Nattawat was afraid to breathe too loudly, terrified of waking him. And so beautiful. There was no one in the world more beautiful than him.

Norawit sniffed softly in his sleep, his nose twitching faintly with each deep breath. Tiny creases formed at the bridge of his nose, near the small bump, and Nattawat was ready to kiss every single one of them a hundred thousand times because they were so unbearably adorable. And every tiny freckle scattered across his cheekbones — so delicate you could only see them from this close. He couldn't get enough of him, and his heart pounded so wildly in his chest that its echoes seemed to fill the silent car.

He leaned forward and brushed the tip of his nose against the warm skin of Norawit's cheek. Nattawat inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, savoring the now-familiar, beloved scent of ripe watermelon mixed with blooming cherry. Their scent. He loved sitting like this, guarding his fragile sleep, breathing in that gentle fragrance, holding his warm fingers, resting against his cheek. Everything inside him turned upside down under the weight of feelings he had never known before.

It was terrifying. He had never been so deeply attached to anyone — to the point of aching in his chest, trembling hands, tears, and breathlessness. He cherished him far too much. And breathing someone in like this was a sweet kind of torment. A maddening dependence, but the most beautiful kind possible.

"I'm completely crazy about you, Norawit. What have you done to me?" he whispered, kissing the soft skin at his temple.

Norawit flinched slightly and woke up at once. He didn't pull away, only stayed where he was, smiling tiredly as he felt those gentle touches and warm breath on his face.

"Did I fall asleep?"

"Yeah. We're already here. Ready to go?"

"I don't want this evening to end. You made it incredible. It's five to five, Natt," Norawit smirked.

"Let's just stop keeping score. We're even now," Nattawat replied, tenderly stroking his cheek with his knuckles.

"A draw? I'm fine with that. I don't want to compete with you."

"And you don't have to. I'll never be your rival," Nattawat said, kissing his forehead.

“Thank you for today.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll have more dates.”

“You promise?” Norawit asked, opening his eyes.

“No,” Nattawat laughed softly, wrinkling his nose. “I’m not much of a romantic. But I’ll try for you.”

“Next to you, I feel special. No one’s ever given me that.”

Nattawat brushed his nose along Norawit’s cheek and left a light kiss at the corner of his lips.

“It’s simple. You are special to me,” he said quietly, then sighed. “Come on. They’re probably waiting for us for dinner.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

Norawit stepped out of the car, stretching with his arms raised and fingers laced together. He yawned tiredly, then smiled in pure happiness. The ending of this day had been nothing short of magical. Watching his favorite cartoon on the most romantic open-air date of his life, with his boyfriend — what could be better? He knew he would never forget a single second of today. Even the scent of caramel popcorn seemed to cling to his shirt and hair, embedding itself deep into his memory.

Behind him, the soft click of the pickup’s door sounded, and Nattawat slowly approached. His radiant face appeared right in front of him, and Norawit draped his arms around his shoulders, hugging his neck. Strong arms circled his waist as Nattawat kissed him gently. He would have loved to continue the evening in their soft bed, thanking him with the most passionate tenderness, but he was too exhausted. Norawit sighed and tilted his head back, gazing at the dark sky.

A huge moon bathed the Lertratkosum family’s cozy home and everything around it in soft silver light. The silence was so beautiful it felt like something you wanted to breathe in and carry with you into sleep. How strange it was without the sounds of a city — no cars, no voices, no mechanical noise. Only the wind, rustling leaves, and crickets.

“The moon is so beautiful,” Norawit murmured, smiling.

“Yeah. Incredible,” Nattawat replied, without even looking at it.

His eyes were fixed on the flawless face just inches from his own. Nothing here was more beautiful than him. No wonder of nature could compare to Norawit. And Titicharoenrak couldn’t suppress his smile when he noticed that Nattawat wasn’t looking at the moon at all, but only at him. So in love. His eyes sparkled like the brightest stars in the galaxy, and that was better than any words. Nattawat’s feelings were becoming harder to hide with each passing day.

“Just look at them,” Pond said, stepping onto the porch and folding his arms. “Two lovebirds. Makes me sick.”

“Nice to see you too, old man,” Nattawat laughed.

“Get in here already. Everyone’s waiting.”

They went inside, and the others immediately swarmed them with questions about the date. Pahn attacked Norawit, demanding every emotional detail, while the rest stood around, smiling in anticipation.

Nattawat let out a relieved breath, realizing it had all been worth it. Norawit’s glowing smile was the best reward for the evening. For that alone, it was worth planning surprises again and again, even small ones. He melted under Norawit’s attention. He needed it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the glare of headlights outside and lifted his brows in surprise. Who could be arriving at this hour? Maybe Pond’s parents? Still smiling foolishly, he walked to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

His heart clenched in a sudden spike of dread, the smile sliding instantly from his face. Fear slammed into him like ice.

Something was wrong.

Two black SUVs rolled to a stop outside the house. Two figures in black clothes and balaclavas stepped out. Shit. A frozen terror settled in Nattawat’s eyes as they pulled automatic rifles from the vehicles and raised them toward the house.

In a heartbeat, he understood everything.

He had no more than three heartbeats to change something. Just three seconds before they aimed — or all his friends would die.

Time seemed to freeze.

In movies, moments like this slip into slow motion so the audience can feel every emotion. But this wasn’t a movie. This was reality. A terrifying reality for everyone inside the house. The world went eerily silent. The crushing quiet pressed against his skull, and only the thunder of his own heartbeat roared in his ears.

First second.

Nattawat spun toward his friends, who still had no idea what awaited them. Night was the first to catch the wild fear in his brother’s eyes and instantly tensed.

Second second.

A raw, animal cry tore from Nattawat’s chest as he stepped toward Norawit, who stood an arm’s length away.

“Everyone, get down! Now!”

They all flinched at the desperate scream — and in that same instant, the shooting began. Pahn's piercing shriek split the air, shattering every heart in the room.

Third second.

The deafening burst of gunfire forced them to obey. Nattawat shoved Norawit into the corner, away from the windows, and threw himself to the floor, covering his head. Each shot made them flinch. The noise was so overwhelming it felt like it stunned them. A dull agony ripped through Nattawat's chest, tears flooding his eyes.

He hadn't made it in time.

His friends were still standing in the line of fire when the bullets started raining down.

Glass, furniture, walls — everything exploded, shattered, splintered. Screams. Tears. Ringing ears. Hearts bleeding from terror. Breath stolen by panic.

Absolute chaos.

Every shot tore them apart. Every ragged, terrified breath would haunt them forever. Every bullet carved itself into their memory, engraving the date and time of this nightmare deep into their hearts, as if burying fragments of their wounded souls inside this house.

In moments like these, you can do nothing but count bullets and heartbeats. You lie there helplessly, whispering silent prayers to no one, begging it to end. And when Nattawat's count reached the dozens, the attack stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Silence crashed down.

The world froze again.

Outside, doors slammed and tires screeched. They were gone — leaving behind shattered lives. Those five minutes erased everything, starting a brutal countdown for them all. Outside, life crept onward as if nothing had happened, while inside the Lertratkosum family's home, deathly silence reigned.

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For several minutes after the nightmare ended, a deafening silence hung in the air — so heavy that Nattawat could hear the ragged breath tearing itself from his own chest. It felt as if he hadn't been breathing the entire time. Enough time had passed for the armed men to leave,

yet no one dared to move. They lay scattered among shards of glass and splintered wood, showing no signs of life. Nattawat was terrified to open his eyes, afraid to discover that one of his friends was dead. The thought twisted his insides into a violent whirlpool. No one spoke. He couldn't even hear them breathing, and that only made the tension worse.

Were they all dead?

Then, a few seconds later, he heard movement somewhere nearby, the soft crunch of glass against the wooden floor. Slowly, he lifted his head and looked around in horror. Silence. Too much silence. His friends lay in different corners of the hall. Only Norawit was sitting upright, pressed into a corner against the wall. He was the only one who had moved. The rest remained motionless.

Nattawat pulled several large shards out of his hair and swept a frantic glance around the room. His mind slipped into a numb, stunned haze at the sight before him. The cozy house that had become their little paradise now looked like the scene of a brutal massacre. The sofa's upholstery, shredded by bullets, hung in tatters from ragged holes, its fragments scattered across the floor. Dust from the gunfire still lingered in the air, and shattered glass lay everywhere.

Unthinkable. How could this have happened?

He turned his gaze toward where the others lay and sat frozen for a full minute, staring at the streaks of blood beside them. Then a hoarse sound reached his ears — something like a quiet, wounded whimper. He looked up at Norawit.

Titicharoenrak was staring at something past him, eyes filling with tears. He sat curled into himself, knees drawn tight to his chest, arms wrapped around them. His whole body was trembling violently. He whispered something under his breath, then suddenly squeezed his eyes shut.

Nattawat forced himself to his feet, crossed the room in a few quick steps, and dropped to his knees in front of him. His frightened gaze raced over Norawit's familiar face and body — and his heart skipped when he saw the blood splattered across one cheek. A few crimson drops had frozen just beneath his cheekbone, with thin trails running down toward his neck. The sight snapped Nattawat fully back to himself. He cupped Norawit's face in both hands, turning it gently from side to side, then quickly checked his trembling limbs.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, stroking his shoulders softly. "Baby, are you hurt?"

Norawit didn't answer, only continued murmuring. He slowly opened his empty eyes, staring straight through Nattawat, unfocused. Something was wrong. He looked dazed, disoriented, lost in time and space. The attack had yanked some buried, agonizing lever inside him, reducing him to a frightened child who had no idea what to do. Just like children do when they're terrified — they curl in on themselves, hide, avoid looking at the world, waiting for someone safe to find them.

Nattawat understood instantly what memory had been dragged to the surface: the night his parents were murdered.

Fuck. This was bad.

He exhaled shakily and gently brushed his fingertips along Norawit's cheek, terrified of scaring him even more, but knowing he had to bring him back. He stroked his skin with his thumb, a little firmer this time. Still no reaction.

"W-what gives her the s-strength… to not g-give up?" Norawit whispered, stuttering, swaying slightly. "And to f-fill herself with l-light… in spite of her e-enemies…"

"Baby?" Nattawat called softly, then carefully took his fingers, enclosing them in his own. "It's me. You're safe, okay? Look at me. I'm here. You're not alone. I'm right here with you."

Norawit jerked so violently that Nattawat flinched too. It was as if that voice tore him awake from a nightmare and dragged him back to reality. With every second, his gaze grew clearer, more alive.

"Natt," he whispered weakly, then froze.

"Yes, I'm here. It's okay. Come here," Nattawat murmured, gently pulling him close.

Norawit kept his arms locked around his knees, unable to let go, but he leaned into Nattawat's chest anyway, burying his nose against his familiar neck. A shaky breath left him, as if he had been waiting only for this rescue — the presence of the person he loved most. He trembled so hard that real fear gripped Nattawat's heart for his state of mind. *God, what must he be feeling right now?*

Carefully, Nattawat pried Norawit's stiff fingers from their grip around his legs. His hands were rigid, almost stone, and it took effort to loosen them without hurting him. Nattawat placed Norawit's palm against his own neck, stroking it gently. The warmth of his skin reached Norawit instantly, bringing visible relief. His scent, soft and familiar, wrapped around him like a protective cocoon. Norawit clutched at him like a lifeline, wrapping his other trembling arm around his waist.

Nattawat held him close, like a fragile, defenseless child, trying to calm the storm raging inside him. He kissed his temple, smoothed his hair, whispering silent prayers to every god he could think of, thanking them for keeping Norawit alive. He had never seen him like this before. And even though he himself was barely holding together, he forced himself to be stronger, to become Norawit's anchor.

"Are you okay?" Norawit whispered faintly, clutching his T-shirt. "You're not hurt?"

"No," Nattawat answered, kissing the top of his head. "I'm okay. I'm fine."

"And North?"

Nattawat looked over and saw the younger Titicharoenrak slowly pushing himself upright. Relief flooded his chest — if he'd had to deliver bad news right now, it would have shattered him completely. North's state was no better than his brother's, though he held himself

together more tightly. He seemed dazed, moving on pure autopilot, staring blankly ahead as he sat on the floor by the sofa, trying to process what had just happened.

The others slowly began to stir. Night rose too, wiping his face with his forearm. He was the only one who didn't look utterly broken by fear, holding himself with calm restraint. Some people drew strength from extreme stress — and he seemed to be one of them. His eyes searched immediately for his brother, and he exhaled in relief when he saw he was unharmed. Then his gaze snapped to North. Without hesitation, he pulled him into a firm, gentle embrace, checking him carefully for injuries.

They were both alive. Shaken, like everyone else, but alive.

Nattawat exhaled heavily, watching them, and tightened his hold on Norawit. The fear he'd felt for North crashed down on him all at once, squeezing his chest painfully. Guilt followed close behind — for all the times he hadn't been as warm, as caring, as he should have been. Standing on the edge of death made him realize how deeply that mattered. He watched Night hold North, kiss his forehead, and it was painfully obvious how much he loved him. In every glance, every gesture. He was in love.

"Is he dead?" Norawit whispered, trembling. "Why aren't you saying anything? Tell me what's wrong with him."

"No, sorry," Nattawat said quickly, burying his fingers in Norawit's hair. "He's okay."

"What was that?" Norawit whispered.

"I don't know, baby."

No one knew. None of them understood why someone had just tried to kill them. And that made it even more terrifying. They weren't perfect people, but they had never had enemies who truly wanted them dead. In fact, they had no enemies at all — except Lim.

"It looks like it was Damian," Nattawat muttered, frowning. "We don't have any other obvious problems. I just don't understand why."

"Could it really be him?" Norawit whispered, shocked. "North and I did everything he wanted."

Why would he try to kill two people who owed him a fortune? One his source of income from the fights, the other a profitable investment in racing. He'd let them go on this trip without objection, fully aware it was necessary for their shared plans. So why do this? To scare them? But what was the point, when they were already terrified? If that was his goal, he'd succeeded beyond measure.

It was senseless. Illogical. Not the kind of move someone as calculating as Lim would make. Yet they could think of no one else capable of this.

"Pahn," Phuwin's hoarse, terrified voice suddenly cut through the air, making everyone flinch. "Pahn, what's wrong? Hey, wake up. Guys, she's unconscious!"

Those words snapped everyone back to reality. Their eyes flew to the fragile figure lying among the debris. Pahn lay flat on her back, her palm and part of her blue-tinted hair soaked in blood. Nattawat realized the blood on Norawit's face was hers — she'd been lying beside him. Phuwin tried to wake her, clutching his own shoulder, which seemed to be wounded. A dark stain spread rapidly across Pahn's side.

"Pahn, don't you dare," he whispered, trembling as he stroked her hair. "You hear me? Stay with me."

"Does she have a pulse?" Night asked, kneeling beside them, examining the wound. He was the only one able to think clearly. "Check."

"Yes — weak, but it's there."

"She's been shot. We need to get her to a hospital. Now. We can't do this alone."

"There's a hospital here, right?" Phuwin asked desperately. "There has to be. This is still a city."

"Yes," Satang nodded quickly. "Pond should know the way."

"Wait… where is he?" Nattawat asked quietly, scanning the room — and not finding him.

"He's there," Norawit whispered, nodding toward the opposite wall.

Nattawat turned and saw white Converse sticking out from behind the couch, speckled with blood. The unnatural angle of his legs sent a chill down his spine. That must have been what Norawit saw first when he opened his eyes. Pond had been standing right in front of the window when the shooting started.

North rushed to him, grabbed his wrist, and desperately searched for a pulse. Pond lay motionless on his side, blood pooling beneath him. North's fingers trembled against his warm skin, hunting for any sign of life.

There was nothing.

"Please… no," he whispered, and everyone understood at once.

"Tell me he's alive," Nattawat begged, breath tearing painfully from his lungs. "Please. Tell me he's alive."

"I don't know," North said, carefully turning him onto his back. "There's no pulse. He was hit in the chest and stomach."

"Oh God," Night murmured, shaking his head.

"No! Pond! No!" Nattawat cried, his voice breaking, but it dissolved into Norawit's chest as he pulled him into a desperate embrace.

“We have to do CPR, mouth-to-mouth, something!” North pleaded. “Why are you all standing there?! He’s dying!”

“It’s too late,” Satang said quietly, fighting tears as he checked his neck. “There’s nothing we can do, North. I’m sorry.”

He wrapped his arms around the younger boy from behind, eyes squeezed shut.

North knew it. He just couldn’t accept it. He stared ahead, numb, tears sliding silently down his cheeks. The thought that one of his closest friends could die right in front of him was unbearable.

Pond hadn’t lived long after the shooting. He hadn’t even had time to fall or move. And there was nothing any of them could have done.

North hadn’t cried since the day his parents died, but now he didn’t even try to hold it back. He hated himself more than anything in the world and could think of only one thing: it should have been him lying there instead of his friend. This was all his fault. Every single one of these damn problems had entered their lives because of him, so why hadn’t they killed him? It was because of him that they had made an enemy like Damian Lim. It had to be. No one else could have done this. No one else had any reason to threaten them. Damian was the only person they’d ever had real trouble with. Once again, something hadn’t gone his way, so he’d come to remind them who was in charge. A real piece of shit.

“Pahn needs to get to a hospital, guys. It’s bad. Her internal organs could be damaged. We can’t save Pond anymore, but we can save her. Does anyone know if there’s a hospital here? We won’t make it back home in time,” Night says, pressing his hands harder to the wounded side of her body, trying desperately to slow the bleeding. “Pull yourselves together, please. We’re wasting time. Every second matters for her right now.”

“Yes,” Nattawat answers hoarsely, pulling away from Norawit. “Yes, there is. I think if you go down the main street, it’s right near the square. A two-story green building.”

“Good,” Night nods sharply. “Phu, let’s go. You need help too. I’ll drive you. Satang, are you okay? You’re not hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Then pick her up and get her to the car. I’ll be right there.”

Satang nods, tense and pale, then rushes to Pahn and carefully lifts her fragile body into his arms. Norawit watches as her small, blood-soaked hand hangs limply in the air, and something inside his chest painfully collapses. If they don’t save her, they’ll lose two people they love today. That would be impossible to survive. This is already too much for all of them.

Satang carries her to the car, and Phuwin follows closely, not leaving her side for a second.

Night walks over to his brother, sinks down beside him, and without a word, wraps his arms tightly around his shoulders. So tightly that Nattawat almost feels his bones crack. Probably for the first time since they'd grown close, he's holding him like this, giving him all his warmth. Damn it, he had never crossed those boundaries before. Never allowed himself to show this weakness, knowing Nattawat disliked such displays and hated being put in an awkward position by open emotion. But right now, he didn't care. The fear of losing him had been unbearable. They could have lost each other forever.

Nattawat takes a deep breath and hugs him back just as tightly, closing his eyes. He truly lets himself sink into it. Night's warmth wraps around him like a down blanket, his familiar scent filling his lungs. Somewhere deep inside, it becomes easier to breathe, even though his soul is being torn apart by suffocating grief. He's so grateful his younger brother is unharmed. He would have lost his mind if he'd died today. He rarely admits it, even to himself, but he loves him more than he can say. He is the only family he has left. Only Norawit is closer. And for him, he would probably step in front of bullets without hesitation.

"Don't say anything," Night whispers, holding him even tighter. "I should have done this long ago, without any reason at all — just because you're my brother. There's no one more important to me than you."

"We both should have," Nattawat answers softly, ruffling his hair at the nape. "Go. We can't waste time. We can't lose Pahn too."

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Long hours of waiting. Crushing panic. Uncontrollable fear. Trembling hands. Overwhelming nervous tension. A complete loss of any sense of time and space. When you sit on the floor beneath the door of the ICU, waiting for even the smallest piece of good news, everything else fades away. You forget about hunger and sleep, you stop feeling exhaustion and physical pain. None of it matters, because in moments like this, the entire world shrinks to a single white door with a small window — the door behind which someone dear to you is fighting for their life. The waiting devours you from the inside, but you endure, because there is no other choice.

Pahn had been surrounded by doctors for several hours. No one was allowed to see her, and only occasionally did nurses rush out in a flurry of movement. That alone meant her condition was still unstable. The prognosis was grim. The doctors had managed to perform a complex surgery and stop the heavy bleeding, but the fragile girl was still battling for her chance to live. She was strong, and all her friends could do was hope that she would find the strength to claw her way out of this nightmare.

The medical care here wasn't the best. The hospital was small, and truly skilled doctors were few, but thankfully, there had been a surgeon capable of saving her life. Now everything

depended solely on her body. As soon as she stabilized, they would transfer her home to a better clinic. For now, all that remained was to wait for her to wake up. It was terrifying. Time dragged unbearably slow. The operation itself had felt endless, but waiting afterward was even worse. The waiting was what truly killed.

Throughout those endless hours, Norawit couldn't stay still. He paced the corridor from one end to the other, nervously biting his lip. Satang sat beside Phuwin, whose arm was wrapped in a fresh bandage where he'd been grazed by a bullet. Phu looked hollow, as though he were on the verge of losing his mind — Pahn meant more to him than anyone else. Nattawat stood by the window, staring blankly at the distant mountains, absently scraping at the cracked paint on the green wall. The air reeked of chlorine and antiseptic. The wooden floors creaked irritably with every step, and the ceiling lights buzzed with a maddening hum. Maybe all of it felt unbearable simply because they themselves were stretched to the breaking point, terrified and raw, so every little thing set their nerves on edge.

Their nerves were like tightly drawn strings, ready to snap at the slightest wrong movement or careless breath. No one knew what to do or what to expect. In this nightmare, the only one who appeared relatively calm was Night, standing quietly in the corner. While the others were visibly unraveling, he had forced himself to pull together. If not for his cold, necessary composure in those first critical moments, Pahn might already be dead. Every second had mattered then, and his clarity of mind had saved her life. Now, he was busy messaging people about her treatment, arranging her transfer to Los Angeles after surgery and securing a place for her in one of the city's best hospitals. And it was he who took on the hardest role — calling Pond's parents to tell them everything. He couldn't do it over the phone; some things had to be said face to face. He only asked them to come back as soon as possible. When they arrived, he would have to shatter their hearts, and the thought of it was unbearable. What could be worse than telling parents their child is dead? None of the others could bring themselves to do it. But someone had to. And he was the only one brave enough.

To avoid disturbing the others and pacing like a caged animal, Norawit stepped outside. He sat alone on the worn concrete steps of the small hospital, smoking what was probably his third cigarette in a row. He couldn't calm down or fully grasp that one of his best friends was gone, and his only close female friend was hanging between life and death. Even thinking about it made his hands shake and his chest tighten painfully. Pond's smiling face still hovered before his eyes, his laughter and voice echoing in his ears, tearing his heart apart. He would never hear them again. Never feel that familiar tight hug when they met up to race. Everything would be different now. Nothing would ever be the same.

The suffocating sense of helplessness settled once more like an unbearable weight on his shoulders, and he had no idea what to do next. The unknown frightened him, deepening the despair. Nothing could be changed anymore. No one could bring Pond back, and only a miracle could save Pahn. It was hard to keep himself together, so instead of snapping at the people he loved most, he shut down. He hadn't spoken since the moment they learned their friend was dead. It was better this way. None of them needed fights fueled by raw emotions. Everyone was already hurting enough, and he didn't want to wound them further.

Suddenly, familiar fingers pluck the slowly smoldering cigarette from his hand, making him flinch. Nattawat sits beside him on the steps and takes a deep drag. His face is empty,

stripped of expression. All his raw emotions are frozen in his large brown eyes, darker and sadder than ever, clouded with pain and compassion. Just hours ago, he had lost one of the closest people in his life — someone he'd known for years, someone who had taught him so much about the thing he loved most. It was terrifying.

Norawit exhales heavily and closes his eyes for a few seconds. He's glad Nattawat is here. More than glad, he needs him. Just his presence. It's enough to feel a little steadier, a little calmer. But he can't ask him to stay. People as closed-off as Nattawat usually prefer to grieve alone. Yet Nattawat gently rests his head on Norawit's shoulder and closes his eyes too, seeking support in him. He needs Norawit's warmth just as desperately, the only person capable of giving him even a fragile sense of peace.

"Pahn's condition seems to be stabilizing," Nattawat murmurs quietly. "Night called for transport. Tomorrow she'll be in a good clinic, under the care of the best doctors."

Norawit drags a hand over his face and presses his temple against Nattawat's head, breathing deeply. The crushing weight inside his chest loosens, finally allowing him a full breath. These are the best words he's heard since yesterday. It means the worst is over. His best friend will survive. It doesn't mean everything is fine — but it's something. For a few minutes, they sit in silence, leaning into each other. The heavy quiet cuts into his ears, but for once, Norawit doesn't know what he's supposed to say.

"You haven't said a word since it happened," Nattawat says softly, exhaling a thin stream of smoke. "Are you afraid you'll stop talking, like North once did?"

"Does that scare you?" Norawit asks with a bitter half-smile.

"I don't care. Even if you do, I'll learn sign language for you and teach you how to speak again. I'm just worried about you."

"We're all feeling the same. We lost someone incredibly dear. I honestly don't know what to say. I feel awful. Helpless."

"I know. And I feel awful too, baby," Nattawat replies, taking his hand and lacing their fingers together. "Do you think it was Lim?"

"Probably," Norawit shrugs lightly. "I don't know anyone else capable of this."

"He'd better not cross any of us for the next hundred years. If anything happens to Pahn, I'll kill him myself."

"I want to crush his throat and strangle him too," Norawit exhales, running a hand through his hair. "He's taken too much from us. What do we do now?"

"We go back," Nattawat says, kissing his knuckles. "Pahn will be transferred soon, Phu will stay with her. Pond's parents are already on their way back. They've bought tickets. The funeral will probably be in Los Angeles. His whole life was there."

“And just like that, the fairy tale ends,” Norawit whispers painfully, drawing a deep breath. “God. Maybe we shouldn’t have come here at all.”

“No one could have known it would end like this. If someone wanted to send us a warning, they would’ve done it anywhere. But we spent some of the happiest days of our lives here. I’m glad Pond carried those memories with him.”

“I still don’t understand why Damian did it.”

“We’ll find out when we’re back. He’ll answer for Pond’s death. I won’t let it go,” Nattawat says, kissing his shoulder.

“Looks like we’re both obsessed with revenge now.”

“And I won’t judge you for it. They took something precious from me. Wanting punishment is only fair.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Let’s go. You need rest after all this. I’ll drive,” Norawit says.

“No, I—”

“I will,” Norawit cuts in firmly, pulling him into a tight embrace, fingers sinking into the soft hair at the nape of his neck. “Pond was incredibly important to you. You’re not in a state to drive. It’s okay. I’ve got this.”

“Thank you,” Nattawat whispers, pressing his nose to Norawit’s neck, breathing deeply, eyes fluttering shut. “I really can’t do anything right now.”

“That’s what you have me for. You fall — I’ll catch you, remember?” Norawit asks, kissing his temple.

“Yeah. Of course I remember,” Nattawat replies, a faint smile touching the corner of his lips.

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It was terrifying to return to the house where all that horror had happened, but they needed to grab their things quickly.

The place looked monstrous, as if a real massacre had taken place — which, in truth, it almost had. The outside walls were riddled with bullet holes, and inside, the first-floor hall had been torn apart by heavy gunfire. Shards of glass, splintered wood, ripped upholstery, and dark stains of blood littered the floor — the very spot where Pond and Pahn had lain before.

For the sake of his own fragile emotional stability, Nattawat decided not to step inside again. He was too vulnerable right now, and he had the strength to admit it. He was barely holding himself together, so Norawit went in alone.

He tried not to look at the devastation, not to think about what had happened. He rushed upstairs, stuffing the bare essentials into bags, his movements chaotic and hurried. It took every ounce of restraint not to break down right there. Unwanted tears burned his eyes, but he stubbornly forced them back. The bitterness of injustice and the ache of grief lodged in his throat like a nauseating lump, while rage shredded what little self-control he had left.

He couldn't shake the guilt, maybe Lim had been displeased by something he'd done. And the longer he stayed within these blood-soaked walls, the harder his body trembled. Snatching up the last of Nattawat's things, Norawit bolted from the house as if running a sprint, moving purely on adrenaline.

He tossed the bags into the trunk, slid into the driver's seat, and squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to chase away the nightmare memories flooding his mind, but it was useless. Emotions crashed over him like a natural disaster, stealing the air from his lungs. His grip tightened on the Mustang's steering wheel until the leather let out a faint creak in the heavy silence, his knuckles whitening from the strain.

He just needed to breathe. They had to get home. He had to pull himself together.

Nattawat watched him anxiously for several long moments but didn't ask anything. He understood all too well what was happening. Instead, he gently stroked the back of Norawit's neck and rested his forehead against his. He could feel the violent shiver running through his body, hear his ragged breathing tearing through the quiet.

When Norawit couldn't calm down, Nattawat remembered the one method Norawit himself had once called the most soothing. Carefully, he loosened Norawit's grip on the steering wheel, slipping his fingers between his and holding them gently. He pressed soft kisses to them, caressing them tenderly, helping him find his breath again.

Norawit let out a shaky exhale and looked down at their intertwined hands resting on his thigh. The warmth and tenderness of the touch grounded him instantly. He felt the presence and love of the person beside him, and it brought him peace. Nattawat always knew how to help, and in that moment, Norawit was endlessly grateful. Even though Nattawat himself was in pain, he still tried to build a fragile bubble of comfort and safety around them.

Was there anyone in this world more beautiful than him? Definitely not. He was like a real angel who had fallen straight into Norawit's life, making it brighter with every passing day.

"I love you," Norawit whispered, kissing the back of his hand.

He rubbed his eyes, started the engine at last, and, finally calmer, they drove away toward Los Angeles.

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The highway was nearly empty all the way to the city. Cars appeared now and then, only to peel off at an exit or fall behind when Titicharoenrak swept past them with effortless speed. It wasn't until the interchange closer to home that the traffic thickened a little.

They drove in complete silence, but it wasn't suffocating. They both needed it. There were too many thoughts crowding their heads, too much to process all at once.

Norawit didn't let go of his boyfriend's hand. Even when he shifted gears, he kept their fingers intertwined, guiding the stick with their joined hands before settling Nattawat's palm on his thigh and stroking the warm skin there. He needed the contact. Needed to feel that he wasn't alone.

Nattawat sat quietly, leaned back in his seat, blinking slowly as he stared out the window. Dark trees blurred past along the roadside, mountains looming in the distance. He was exhausted—so tired he could barely keep his eyes open—but, if he was honest, sleep scared him. Somewhere deep down he knew that if he closed his eyes, everything that had happened to them would come back in dreams.

A long, blaring horn shattered the quiet, making them both jolt. Lately they flinched at every sound, and this one cut through the air like a siren from hell.

Norawit's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. A black sports car was riding their bumper, so close it was almost touching. He shifted down and pressed the gas, trying to shake it off. Nattawat watched carefully as the other car accelerated too, falling back in tight behind them again.

What the hell was he doing? The other lanes were practically empty. He could've passed them easily.

"What do you want?" Norawit muttered under his breath, pushing the pedal harder.

"Let him pass," Nattawat said.

"He can go around."

"Maybe he's some psycho asshole. Just move over. Let him go."

Norawit nodded, switched on his signal, and eased into the right lane to clear the way. The black Porsche didn't hurry to overtake them. Instead, it pulled up alongside the Mustang and matched their speed, gliding beside them as if that had been the goal all along.

Norawit huffed, annoyed, and shot Nattawat a bewildered look. Nattawat only shrugged, he didn't get it either. Norawit slowed, trying again to let the car move ahead, but the Porsche slowed too, staying level.

“What the hell do you want from me?” Norawit snapped, glaring at the tinted windows.

“Looks like he wants to race.”

That did it.

Norawit was already in a fragile state, nerves worn thin. This stunt pushed him over the edge. His temper flared like gasoline catching a spark. His emotions revved as fast as the Mustang’s engine. There was no stopping him now. He exhaled sharply, jaw tight. This was the worst possible time to cross him. His mood could get them hurt, but the guy beside them didn’t seem to care. He kept provoking.

The Porsche stuck with them, adjusting its speed and style to mirror Norawit’s. It darted past slower cars and then tucked back in close again. Norawit inhaled sharply through his nose, eyes flashing, hands tightening on the wheel. He shifted gears and slammed the gas.

“Don’t even think about it,” Nattawat warned. “Don’t. We’re not racing.”

“Relax. I’ve learned a lot lately,” Norawit shot back. “I’ll teach him a lesson. Blow off some steam. I’ve got this.”

“That’s not the point. Don’t race just because he wants you to.”

“It’s a challenge. You can see he won’t back off.”

“Norawit…”

“Trust me,” he said firmly. “I’ll shake him off. That’s it.”

He jerked the wheel left and surged forward, overtaking the Porsche. The Mustang roared as Norawit weaved sharply between cars. There was something feral in the way he drove now, raw aggression in every movement, and that was what terrified Nattawat.

His heart began to pound. Driving like this never ended well. Rage always ruined precision.

The Mustang growled and lunged from lane to lane like a predator chasing invisible prey. The Porsche followed. A few times it managed to pull ahead, but Norawit, burning with fury, refused to let it keep the lead for long. He drove like a man possessed, clawing his way back in front every damn time.

Nattawat’s fear only deepened once they reached the city limits and Norawit didn’t slow down. He tore through the streets just as recklessly, creating dangerous situations without thinking. Not everyone on the road had his reflexes.

As his extreme driving coach, Nattawat might have felt proud—Norawit took corners flawlessly, overtook cars in seconds, used techniques he’d practiced in the mountains with terrifying confidence.

But as his boyfriend, Nattawat was unraveling.

He hated how desperately Norawit wanted to win this stupid, pointless race. He tried to stop him, but Norawit waved him off, insisting everything was fine.

Downtown, racing became harder—more cars, more traffic lights. Norawit ignored those too, blasting through a red light. A car nearly slammed into them, horn blaring in protest as they shot across the intersection. Norawit yanked the handbrake to slide into a turn, but the Porsche suddenly revved and cut in, ruining the maneuver.

“Norawit! What are you doing? Stop!” Nattawat shouted as the car fishtailed wildly on a city street full of ordinary people.

Norawit wrestled the wheel, barely regaining control—but ended up in the oncoming lane. His vision felt hazy, as if a veil had dropped over his eyes. He didn’t react to Nattawat’s panicked screams. He was driving straight against traffic, straight toward a school bus.

Nattawat’s eyes widened in horror.

They were threading between cars in the wrong lane, a stunt that could end in a head-on collision any second.

“Norawit! Stop!” Nattawat’s voice cracked with desperation as he clutched the seat.

“Too soon,” Norawit muttered, gripping the wheel tighter.

“There’s a bus, for fuck’s sake! What are you doing?”

“I see it.”

“Norawit!”

“I’ve got it.”

“We’re going to hit it! You’ll kill us!”

“No.”

He tapped the brakes, then yanked the handbrake and slammed the gas. The Mustang roared, tires shrieking, white smoke billowing behind them. At the last possible second, he spun the wheel toward a side street on the left and slipped into the turn, missing the bus by seconds. The bus screeched to a stop, horn blaring.

The Porsche didn’t attempt the same insanity. It simply continued down its lane, merging calmly into traffic as if none of this had happened.

Norawit slowed, turning into the quiet neighborhood where his house was. His whole body trembled—adrenaline and anger coursing through him. White specks flickered in his vision. The rush intoxicated him so completely it felt like he’d slipped out of reality.

“Stop the car,” Nattawat said coldly, staring straight ahead.

“What?” Norawit blinked rapidly.

“Stop the fucking car!”

“What happened?”

“Stop. Now, you insane asshole!”

Norawit frowned in confusion but slowed and pulled over in the middle of the quiet street. There wasn’t much traffic; they weren’t blocking anyone.

He looked at Nattawat, who sat there for a few seconds, breathing hard. When Norawit opened his mouth to speak again, Nattawat unbuckled his seatbelt and got out, slamming the door. He walked around the car and yanked the driver’s door open.

Norawit looked up at him, bewildered. “What’s going on?”

“Get the hell out,” Nattawat said, pointing away from the car.

“What?”

“Get out of my car!” Nattawat shouted, eyes blazing.

“Baby, I—”

“Get the fuck out, Titicharoenrak!” he spat, grabbing Norawit by the shirt and dragging him out of the seat.

Norawit raised his hands instinctively, like a criminal caught red-handed, and stepped out of the Mustang. Nattawat shoved him hard in the chest. Norawit stumbled back, his spine hitting the car, pain flaring sharply.

Nattawat’s eyes, usually so warm, were black holes of fury now. His expression was twisted with something deeper than anger. Hurt. The sight made Norawit’s heart drop straight into hell.

A second ago he’d been shaking from adrenaline and the thrill of winning. Now he was shaking from something else entirely—fear. A sudden, suffocating fear that he might lose him because of his own stupidity. He didn’t fully understand why Nattawat was this furious, but something was terribly wrong, and it was his fault.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Norawit asked cautiously.

The slap came fast and hard.

Pain exploded across the left side of his face. He squeezed his eyes shut, clutching his cheek, then looked up in shock.

The haze vanished instantly.

Nattawat was staring at him with wild fury—and a deep, aching disappointment that shattered everything inside Norawit like a house of cards. In a split second, it all turned to ash.

Nattawat looked at him like he didn't recognize him anymore.

Nattawat is breathing hard, his chest rising and falling in sharp, uneven pulls. The hand he struck with is still trembling. He is so full of anger that it makes something cold and sick crawl under Norawit's skin.

Only now does Norawit understand what that anger really is.

Fear.

Nattawat had been afraid for his life.

Norawit had gambled with it so recklessly, chasing a pointless victory that meant absolutely nothing. The last fifteen minutes replay in his mind in brutal clarity, and he finally understands what he's done. He had staked not only his own life, but someone else's. It was stupid. Unforgivable.

Nattawat had told him to stop. Again and again.

But Norawit hadn't listened.

No, he hadn't wanted to listen.

He'd been too damn stubborn, too blinded by the storm of ugly emotions boiling inside him. Someone provoked him, and he took the bait, forgetting he wasn't alone in that car.

At the time, the rage felt intoxicating. It felt like release. Racing had always helped him outrun the darkness clawing at his chest. But this time was different. This time he had endangered the most important person in his life.

Now he understood the disappointment in Nattawat's eyes.

This one reckless mistake had probably shattered the fragile trust Nattawat had given him, trust Norawit had worked so hard to earn. Shame burns through him. He'd acted like a selfish bastard. Thinking only of himself, of his own need to vent, he'd lost control behind the wheel for the first time in his life.

And it could have ended in tragedy.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I—"

"I don't give a damn about your excuses! Go to hell! Find yourself another car!"

"I'm sorry. I really am."

“You almost killed us!” Nattawat shouts, his voice echoing down the street. People turn to stare. “What the hell were you thinking?!”

“I’m sorry. I get it now. I’m sorry,” Norawit says, reaching for his hand, but Nattawat jerks away.

“Is this what I taught you? Is that why we spent hours burning rubber? So you could risk our lives on a whim? For what? To prove to some random idiot that you’re worth something? You should’ve thought about me!”

“Natt, I know I messed up. I only now realize how bad it could’ve been. Please, forgive me.”

“I don’t think you understand a damn thing!”

“I shouldn’t have done it. You’re right. It was inexcusable. I had no right to risk your life. Especially not when trust means so much to you.”

“Oh my God, I do trust you!” Nattawat snaps. “But that doesn’t give you the right to act like this! You can’t use my trust like that!”

“You’re right,” Norawit whispers, staring down at the asphalt. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you didn’t mean for it to go that way. I know you’re angry. I know you’re grieving. But damn it, Titicharoenrak! You’re not the only one who’s hurting! All of us are!”

“I know. It was stupid. I’m sorry.”

“You’re worried about Pahn. You blame yourself for Pond. You’re trying to survive what happened to us. But I feel it too! And instead of facing it together, you make me relive the fear all over again! I’m already scared every single day, you idiot!”

“Baby, I just—”

“I’ve known him since I was fifteen!” Nattawat’s voice breaks. “Longer than any of you! I was close to his family! I lost him too, Norawit! Stop acting like you’re the only one who did!”

“I know.”

“It hurts!” Nattawat cries, tears shimmering in his eyes. “It hurts so damn much, but I’m holding it together!”

“I know,” Norawit says softly.

“You don’t get to do this to me. Not you. Please. You don’t get to act like you’re the only one who lost something. And you don’t get to blame yourself for everything. Should I start doing that too? Because I could! I should’ve reacted faster. I saw it happen. I could’ve pushed him out of the way, but I wasn’t fast enough! Any of us could’ve died! You, me, Phu, Satang—any of our brothers! We all failed to save him. But the blood on his hands belongs to Damian! So stop!”

He shouts the last word so loudly that Norawit flinches. Nattawat's voice is hoarse, cracking under the weight of everything he's been holding in.

"Stop," he whispers now, trembling. "Please. You don't have to carry it alone. We're all guilty of not saving him."

Tears glitter in his eyes like shattered glass. Norawit can't bear to look. It's too much. Seeing Nattawat this broken is unbearable, and it's his fault.

Nattawat drags his fingers through his hair, yanking hard. He looks up at the sky, swears viciously, then kicks the Mustang's tire.

"Damn it!" he shouts, kicking it again. "I couldn't save him! We can't bring him back! I know you're desperate, I get it! But you don't get to make me afraid of losing you too when I'm barely holding myself together! That's cruel!"

Norawit frowns, startled.

"So you weren't scared for yourself?" he asks quietly.

"Damn it! Damn it!" Nattawat keeps hitting the tire like it's responsible for everything. "I hate this! I don't want to feel this! I don't want it to hurt! I don't want to be scared! I don't want to love anyone anymore! Why did I fall for you? I don't want to be weak because of it!"

Norawit steps forward and grabs his wrist, pulling him into a tight embrace. Nattawat buries his face against the hollow of Norawit's neck, still shouting in anguish, struggling weakly, but Norawit doesn't let go. He absorbs the blows against his back, holding him like something fragile and irreplaceable.

For the first time since the bloodshed, Nattawat lets himself break.

He fights it a few more seconds, then the fight drains out of him. His cries dissolve into ragged breaths and broken curses. His hands clutch at Norawit's shoulders, trembling, and finally the tears spill from those beautiful eyes.

Right now he feels impossibly small.

And the fact that he allows himself to fall apart in Norawit's arms means he still trusts him. More than anyone.

Norawit threads his fingers through Nattawat's hair, cradling the back of his head, letting him empty out all the pain he's been carrying—past and present. Nattawat has always been the strong one. The one who survives loss after loss: his mother, a childhood friend, now Pond. Loving has always meant losing for him.

And instead of understanding that, Norawit had made him fear losing him too.

Idiot.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry,” Norawit whispers, pressing kisses into his hair. “I’m such an idiot. It won’t happen again.”

“I was scared,” Nattawat murmurs against his neck. “So damn scared for you, you stupid idiot. Don’t ever do that again. I didn’t teach you to use those skills on public roads. And not so you could risk your life for nothing. I hate you right now. God.”

“I deserve that,” Norawit says with a bitter half-smile.

“No,” Nattawat whispers, pulling back just enough to look at him. “I mean—yes, but no. Whatever. Just don’t do it again. It wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t even a race that mattered. You were risking yourself for nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” Norawit says, kissing him quickly. “I’ll never do that again.”

“I’m so afraid of losing you. You have no idea. I lose my mind every day knowing you’re going to race like that. How am I supposed to live with that?”

“I don’t want it either. But I don’t have a choice. It’s my chance to be free.”

“I know,” Nattawat sighs.

“You won’t lose me. I’ll do everything I can to survive. I’m not ready to die.”

Nattawat studies his face for a few seconds, then nods. He believes him. He knows Norawit will fight to win, he always does. But the fear still sits heavy in his chest, whispering that none of this will end well.

“I hit you,” Nattawat says quietly, brushing his fingers over Norawit’s cheek. “I’m sorry. I lost my temper.”

“It worked. Snapped me right out of it,” Norawit says, the corner of his mouth lifting faintly. “But if that’s how you plan to bring me to my senses every time we fight, maybe we should argue less. I bruise easily.”

“I was impulsive. All I could see was that damn bus we were heading toward. The gunshots. Pond. Pahn. Everything.” His forehead rests against Norawit’s. “I’m terrified of losing you. I’m already barely surviving what happened. And with Damian still out there… you’re always in danger. Don’t make me more afraid than I already am. Please.”

“I’ll try. I promise.”

“It won’t be easy now. For any of us. But we can’t drown in grief. We have to finish this. We have to take that bastard down. Or at least, you have to win that race. For Pond. That was his wish.”

“You’re right,” Norawit says quietly, pulling him close again. “We’ll do it for Pond. I’ll do everything I can.”

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By the evening of the next day, everyone had gathered at the Loop.

Pond's funeral was set for noon tomorrow, so the street racers and bikers, more united than ever, had decided to come together tonight in his memory. Pahn had finally been transferred to a hospital in Los Angeles; her condition was slowly stabilizing, and Phuwin's arm had fully healed. It seemed as though everything was returning to normal.

But it wasn't.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

The beloved track was crowded, yet it had never been this quiet. A terrible, suffocating silence hung in the air despite the thirty or forty people sitting in the stands. No engines roared. No laughter echoed. They simply sat there, thinking about how this place had lost its owner forever. No one understood how the Loop would go on without Pond Naravit. He had run it himself, from beginning to end.

News of his tragic death had spread quickly. Those who loved and respected him came to pay tribute to someone who had meant so much to all of them.

Everyone held small candles, oppressive little symbols of grief. One by one, they lit them and placed them along the metal fence near the finish line.

Fitting, in a way.

Pond had reached his final finish line, ending the race that had lasted his entire life.

He had been fiercely devoted to this world. Every day of his life was filled with speed and adrenaline; he always smelled faintly of gasoline and motor oil. He had never been afraid of dirty work, even when he began building this haven for adrenaline junkies from the ground up. It would be cruel if the thing he had dedicated his life to fell apart without him. His friends wouldn't allow that. After the funeral, they would decide who would take his place.

Nattawat stood before the monument the guys had built for their friend and drew in a deep breath. He stared at it all, struggling to pull himself together. Tears choked him; grief tore through everything inside him that was still alive. He hadn't felt anything like this in a long time. It was as if someone had ripped away a piece of something bright and precious from his chest.

Candles flickered on the asphalt. Handwritten notes were pinned to the fence. Photographs. And a white bandana Nattawat had just tied there himself—the one Pond used to wear whenever he raced.

"My hair gets in the way," he would always grumble.

No one would ever complain about such stupid little things again.

Nattawat hoped Pond was somewhere better now. That it hadn't hurt too much in the end. That thought alone eased the crushing weight in his chest. Someone had brought a small rainbow-colored cake with candles in honor of his recent birthday, and it hurt almost unbearably. Just days ago, Pond had been so happy. He had taken the people closest to him back to the place where he grew up. He had laughed, celebrated life, never once thinking about death.

And now he was gone. Just like that.

For Nattawat, Pond's death was a point of no return. All he could think about was revenge. He wanted to avenge him. It wasn't right, and he knew it—but he didn't care. He knew the fury would fade eventually, that it was only grief boiling over, but he hated Damian with every fiber of his being for the pain he had caused.

And the worst part was that the man would face no legal consequences. Even if Nattawat told his father, the city judge, it wouldn't matter. A boy from a simple family meant nothing to men like that. His father barely cared about his own children.

Phuwin stepped up beside him and pinned a Polaroid to the fence. In it, Pond sat by a bonfire on the night of his last birthday, smiling so brightly it made their chests ache.

"Sleep well, baby Thee," Phuwin whispered, brushing his fingers over the photo.

Tears slid freely down his cheeks. He didn't try to hide them. Even strong men were allowed to mourn someone like Pond Naravit.

"It's been a while since anyone called him that," Nattawat said quietly. "No one teased him but us."

"Yeah. He hated that nickname," Phuwin huffed with a faint smile. "Didn't stop us, though. I loved hugging him, even when he pretended to fight me off. He'd get so annoyed… but he always melted in the end."

"We were good at getting on his nerves," Nattawat replied, managing the ghost of a smile.

They stood there in silence, staring at the photographs. No one would ever throw them away. Maybe they'd move them closer to the little office near the entrance where Pond used to work, but they would never disappear.

"You understand he has to answer for this," Phuwin said at last, eyes reflecting the candlelight. The flickering flames cast harsh shadows across his face, making him look almost frightening. "We can't let his death go unpunished."

"I understand. But what are you suggesting?"

"We make him regret it."

"What can we possibly do against someone like Damian Lim?"

“We’re stronger than you think.”

“I never said we were weak. But objectively? He has everything on his side—power, money, an army of obedient dogs.”

“Maybe. I don’t care.” Phuwin turned to him, jaw set. “He killed my friend. He almost killed my girlfriend. I’m ready to declare war if that’s what it takes. And when I win, I’ll spit in his disgusting face. Are you with me?”

Nattawat held out his fist. Phuwin bumped it from above and below.

“I want whoever’s responsible to pay. Whatever it costs. If it means war, then we go to war. You know we’re always on the same side.”

“On the surface it looks like he has nothing he cares about,” Phuwin muttered. “But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have weak spots. We’ll find them. And we’ll hit so hard he’ll regret ever coming near us.”

“It won’t be easy.”

“I’m ready for anything. If I have to, I’ll put a bullet in his head myself. Or tear out his throat. The one who killed Pond doesn’t deserve to live.”

Nattawat opened his mouth to answer—

—and the silence of the Loop was shattered by the roar of an engine, like sudden thunder splitting a clear winter sky.

They turned sharply. A sleek sports car rolled through the gates, revving deliberately as it approached. The sound carried a bitter note, and fury ignited inside Nattawat the moment he recognized it.

The aggressive front bumper seemed to glare like a predator. The headlights flashed, almost mockingly. The engine’s growl grated on his nerves. That black car had nearly gotten him and Norawit killed yesterday.

The Porsche pulled up and stopped about ten meters away.

What the hell was he doing here?

Whispers rippled through the crowd. No one recognized the driver, he had never come to the Loop before.

Nattawat shot a quick glance at Norawit in the stands, sitting beside his brother, then fixed his gaze back on the car.

The driver’s door opened.

Polished shoes gleaming to perfection. Dark navy tailored trousers. A matching jacket. A pristine white shirt that practically screamed wealth. Damian Lim closed the door with

effortless elegance, adjusted his hair, and took a few calm steps forward.

Of all people.

Nattawat began to shake with rage the moment he saw his face. How dare he show up here after killing Pond? His fists clenched as he locked eyes with the man's indifferent stare. Damian leaned casually against the hood, hands in his pockets, surveying the scene with open curiosity.

The arrogance was staggering.

He seemed to be searching for someone. When he found older Titicharoenrak, he gave him a brief nod.

Nattawat's vision darkened with fury. Something inside him snapped.

A fraction of a second, and he was moving.

He sprinted forward before anyone could stop him. Shouts erupted behind him, feet pounding against pavement as others tried to catch up, but it was too late. Nattawat's fist slammed into Damian's jaw with savage force. Once. Twice. Again. The impact echoed in his ears, but there was barely any resistance.

That only made him angrier.

"How dare you, you piece of shit?!" he roared, striking him again. "How dare you come here?!"

He drew back for another punch, but Damian caught his forearm mid-swing with sudden, crushing strength. Nattawat's fist froze inches from his face, trembling—not with fear, but with pure, seething rage.

Blood trickled from Damian's split lip. He lifted his chin slightly, eyes cold and detached.

The sight of blood gave Nattawat the smallest flicker of satisfaction.

"Stop, Nattawat," Damian said calmly, holding his gaze. "You're putting me in a rather awkward position in front of all these people. I don't want to hurt you. Don't force me to respond with cruelty."

"You deserve far worse, bastard," Nattawat hissed. "This is your fault."

"You have no idea how wrong you are," Damian replied—and for a split second, something like regret flickered in his eyes.

"Hey! Let him go!" Titicharoenrak shouted, rushing forward and shoving Damian in the chest.

Lim staggers back a few steps, then slowly pulls a handkerchief from the pocket of his blazer and carefully wipes the blood from his lip. A damn neat freak. There's no surprise on his

face, no anger—only cold composure and absolute calm, as if he's long grown used to being treated like this. As always. Indifference has always been his defining trait.

"Keep your stubborn boyfriend on a leash, Titicharoenrak," Damian says, adjusting the bloodstained collar of his shirt.

"Go to hell! Come near me one more time and I'll smash your head into the pavement!" Nattawat shouts, struggling as someone grabs him from behind to hold him back. "How dare you show up here? And in that car? Do you have even a shred of decency? You were driving it yesterday! You almost killed us!"

"Me?" The man arches a brow in mock surprise and smirks. "Let me remind you—it wasn't me who nearly got you killed. It was Titicharoenrak's recklessness. I wasn't the one racing like a lunatic in front of buses on a crowded street. That was your boyfriend."

"Get the hell out of here, you piece of shit! No one wants you here!" Nattawat yells again, trying to break free. "Let me go, Norawit!"

"I wasn't expecting a warm welcome," Damian shrugs indifferently, spreading his hands. "No one's ever happy to see me. Whether I'm wanted or not, I show up when I need to."

Lim lets out a slow breath and sweeps a long gaze over the group lined up behind Nattawat and Norawit. A small army, ready to tear him apart. United against a common enemy—how touching. They look ready to kill for each other.

"My God," he chuckles quietly. "You're like a team of mini-Avengers."

"You'd better stay away from us. Seriously, Damian, get lost," Night says with a grimace.

"And if I don't?" he asks, lifting a brow arrogantly.

"You don't know us, or what we're capable of. You touched our family. For your own sake, you should walk away now," Satang says evenly.

Lim only smirks at that and runs his tongue over his split lip, shifting his gaze to the one he finds, without question, the most interesting of them all.

"Norawit Titicharoenrak—an alpha who solves his own problems and everyone else's. Nattawat Jirochtikul—the second alpha, always at his side. North Titicharoenrak—a troubled teenager with enormous potential he's too afraid to realize, held back by his own weaknesses. None of you have any idea how far he could go. In what direction? Even he doesn't know."

He nods toward each of them in turn.

"Night Jirochtikul—the enduring dark horse with a very large wallet. A small shark you'd be wise to fear. He'd bite off anyone's head to protect his family. Phuwin Tangsakyuen—the soul of your little group. Smiles the most, but touch him and he'll explode like an atomic bomb. Still waters run deep. Satang Kitthipob—a kind omega who follows his alphas. Loyal to the end. The steady shoulder all of you lean on, no matter how badly you behave. Though

you're missing one key piece, aren't you? Pahn—the sexy brain of your operation. A tech genius and hacker who could crack any bank's security in minutes, yet settles for less."

He tilts his head slightly.

"See? I know you fairly well. As a rule, people this strong are bound together by three things: fear, hatred, and loyalty. The last one is obvious—you stand like a wall for each other. I don't see fear in your eyes… but there's more than enough hatred."

"We have our reasons," the older Jirochtikul replies, his voice thick with disgust.

"Nattawat, I understand you're going through one of the stages of grief. Anger is destructive. You need someone to blame for the pain you're in. But I'm not responsible. And for what it's worth… I'm sorry about Pond. He seemed like a good guy."

"Shut your fucking mouth! Don't you dare say his name! You killed him!" Phuwin shouts, stepping forward, but Satang catches his uninjured arm.

"Excuse me?" Lim arches a brow. "I killed him? And why would I do that? I had no conflict with the man. I don't act without reason."

"It was an attempt on all of us," Norawit says, frowning.

"Exactly. There's no one else who'd want to threaten us," North adds.

"Are you certain?" the man asks with a cryptic smile.

They exchange confused glances. Who else could be behind it? They've had no serious enemies. They're all sure of their righteousness—except Norawit.

He swallows hard, his pulse hammering against his skull, pain ringing in his ears.

No. It can't be.

But it might be.

Influence. The only real enemy capable of something like this. The organization he'd secretly started digging into. What if they found out? Why hadn't he thought of this before?

"If I were you," Damian says calmly, fixing Norawit with a meaningful look, "I'd be very careful about where I stick my nose… and whose path I choose to cross."

He exhales and turns away, but the glance is enough.

Norawit understands.

Pond is dead because of him.

"A good enemy is always one step ahead. I regret your friend's death, but killing him was never part of my plans."

“Then why are you here?” Nattawat demands, still seething.

“To keep a promise.”

Lim pulls a set of keys from his pocket and tosses them to Norawit. At that exact moment, a black SUV rolls onto the track.

“Yesterday, you impressed me. So the car is yours now.”

“What?” Nattawat stares at his boyfriend in disbelief.

“What?” North echoes.

“Good luck at the qualifiers, Titicharoenrak,” the man says, walking toward the SUV that has come to pick him up.

“Piece of shit. I’ll kill him,” Nattawat mutters darkly, watching him leave.

While the others stand frozen, trying to process everything they’ve just heard, Norawit quietly steps away, barely able to move his legs.

He can’t believe it.

It doesn’t take a genius to understand what Damian meant. He knows Hwang—obviously. How else would he know about the secret investigation he hinted at? And if Lim knows, then that bastard knows too. This was a warning. A message to shut up. Pond was collateral damage.

“Norawit?” Nattawat calls softly, hurrying after him.

“One second. Just—one second,” Norawit whispers, wrapping his arms around himself as he keeps walking, needing distance from everyone.

Right now, he wants to erase himself from existence.

He should have told them sooner. Before the tragedy. How could he not have realized they were all in danger? What made him think he could take on a criminal organization alone?

Of course the old mercenary sold him out.

What had he been thinking?

Idiot. God.

“Hey, what’s wrong, baby? You’re shaking,” Nattawat says anxiously, catching him by the elbow. “What happened?”

“It wasn’t him,” Norawit whispers, staring down at the toes of his boots.

“Not him? You mean Lim? Don’t be ridiculous. You believed him just like that? There’s no one else,” Nattawat says, stunned.

“I don’t believe a single word he says. But I know he didn’t kill Pond.”

“How do you know?”

“There’s something I need to tell you. Not here. It’s connected to my parents’ death. North can’t know.”

“Okay,” Nattawat says immediately, slipping an arm around his shoulders. “Let’s go home.”

Chapter 12: XII

Chapter Notes

hello:)

Nattawat stared at the gun lying on the coffee table in front of Norawit's bed for a long time, silent and tense. The black, gleaming barrel was turned away, yet it still sent a shiver through his entire body, as if a bullet could burst out of it at any second. This wasn't some harmless toy — it was a thing capable of killing. And his boyfriend had bought it with money he'd been saving for years for completely different purposes. Just how determined, how deadly serious had he been about revenge? It was insane.

He tried to process everything he had just learned, forcing himself to rein in his anger. Meanwhile, Norawit waited patiently for any reaction, sitting in the armchair opposite him, stroking his cat, trying to find comfort in its soft purring. He knew Nattawat would be angry — it was the most natural reaction to such a truth. He saw the tension in his jaw, the muscles tightening and relaxing beneath his skin, but Nattawat didn't shout. He held himself back. And, honestly, that scared him even more. He would have preferred yelling to this heavy, drawn-out silence.

Nattawat lifted his eyes, burning and piercing, fixing them on him, then looked back at the table, at the grip of the gun. So all this time, Norawit had been hiding the fact that he owned a weapon, trying to deal with criminals on his own. He had bought it to kill the monster who had taken his family. He had already used it to threaten a hired killer into giving up crucial information. What was he thinking, risking himself like that? Not that Nattawat could fully blame him — after losing a close friend, he himself thought about revenge almost constantly — but he hated the fact that the person closest to him had been hiding something so serious for so long. This wasn't some small, harmless secret. This was the kind of thing that could not stay hidden for years without consequences. Sooner or later, he should have told him. Why only now, when circumstances forced his hand? Could this tragedy have been prevented? Why hadn't he asked for help?

Back when Norawit had first mentioned learning something about the case, he'd only said he had a lead. And it turned out that this damn lead had a name: Hwang.

The enemy he so desperately wanted to destroy finally had a name — but that didn't make anything easier. No one knew who Hwang really was, how to find him, or even what he looked like. The only clear thing was his direct connection to a dangerous criminal

organization. The same one that had riddled Pond's house with bullets. The same one Norawit had crossed now, just as his father had years ago.

Norawit had blamed himself from the very beginning, but now the guilt was devouring him alive. It had taken immense effort to tell Nattawat everything. Each word had been dragged out of his throat, one by one, through fear of the reaction. And now he simply sat there, staring at the floor, drowning in shame. Nattawat had asked for honesty, and he had kept secrets.

The guilt grew heavier with every second, especially when he saw the grief and pain in Nattawat's eyes. He kept thinking that none of this would have happened if not for his reckless actions. Maybe the tragedy could have been avoided if he'd just told them the truth. But he'd believed he could handle it alone — and this was the result. He was terrified of how Nattawat and the others would react when they found out. What made it worse was that Phuwin was already losing his mind with rage, desperate to punish the one responsible. Norawit couldn't even imagine how he would react to learning that, indirectly, part of the blame lay on him. He might never forgive him.

"Do you realize you're an idiot?" Nattawat finally said, exhaling heavily and dragging a hand down his face.

Norawit dropped his head and nodded slowly.

"I can't even comprehend how stupid you'd have to be to dive into this shit alone and hope it all works out. What were you thinking? You could've been killed."

"Maybe I should have been," Norawit whispered. "Then Pond would still be alive."

"Shut up, Titicharoenrak. It's too late to say things like that. Nothing can be changed now."

"We both know I'm right. If I hadn't—"

"Enough!" Nattawat snapped, shooting him a fierce glare that made everything inside tighten. "You're my boyfriend. Don't ever say that to me again."

"I'm sorry."

"I understand that you didn't want to drag the others into this, but why didn't you tell me? I told you I'd help if you needed it."

"I was going to. I swear. At first, I thought I could find more information before involving you. That name felt familiar, and then everything spiraled out of control. I didn't even have time to look into it properly. There was Lim, his assignments, the race preparations… and in Ojai, you were so happy. I didn't want to ruin it. I never thought it would end like this."

"You shouldn't have hidden anything from me. Maybe it wouldn't have changed much, but I wanted to know what was happening in your life. Isn't that what it means to truly trust each other?"

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I can’t fix this mistake anymore. And this time, the price is too high,” Norawit said, his hands trembling with nerves.

Nattawat took a deep breath, realizing it would be cruel to press him further. Norawit was already punishing himself enough. He needed support, not more guilt. It was obvious he bore part of the blame, but he could never have known it would end this way. Pond’s death was not on him.

“So, you’ve had it all this time?” Nattawat asked, nodding toward the gun.

“Yes. You know I’m paranoid. Since things started getting serious for me…”

“For us,” Nattawat corrected gently. “Our problems. Don’t separate us.”

“Sorry. Since our problems started, I couldn’t take a single step without thinking about protecting myself and the people I love. Lim scared me. I didn’t understand how far he might go or what he really wanted from me.”

“He’s a strange man,” Nattawat said thoughtfully. “I can’t figure out what goes on in his head. He’s cruel, lets himself do things no one else would dare. Damian is arrogant and a real bastard, but I feel like he has some other goal in all this. He’s far too generous with you — there’s definitely a catch. And with me, he’s oddly kind.”

“You think so too?”

“Think about it. I practically humiliated him in the casino, and he just laughed it off. Didn’t do anything in retaliation, even though we all expected him to. Then, when I hit him in front of everyone at the Loop, instead of fighting back, he simply took it. Do people with his reputation act like that? I doubt it,” Nattawat said, shaking his head. “You know what’s even stranger? When he grabbed my hand, he said he didn’t want to hurt me. Doesn’t that sound suspicious? Why would he care about me at all? With his status, he should’ve at least hit me back, especially considering you were beaten in his own territory for just a few harsh words. So why didn’t he do anything to me?”

“I don’t like his interest in you,” Norawit admitted quietly. “Especially because I don’t understand it. Does he like you? Or does he have some other plan? I don’t know, and that drives me insane. I don’t know what to expect.”

“Either way, he probably won’t come near me again without a damn good reason,” Nattawat said darkly. “If he does, I’ll smash his head in.”

“You know now that he isn’t responsible for Pond’s death.”

“I do. But that doesn’t erase his responsibility for everything he’s done to North and you. And he knows that bastard who killed your parents. We need to make him talk. We need that name.”

“To do that, we need real leverage against him, or something valuable enough to trade,” Norawit said, scratching behind Jumu’s ear as the cat slept peacefully in his lap. “Damian

isn’t stupid. And that piece of shit clearly has influence over him too.”

Nattawat exhaled deeply, absently biting his lip as he watched Norawit pet the cat. He was right. You couldn’t get anything out of Lim so easily. Why would he risk himself around people like that? They must have business ties. But the thought that he might know Hwang personally, might even speak to him, was infuriating beyond words. The man was within arm’s reach, and yet completely untouchable.

In truth, there was one more person who might have known him. Most likely personally. The city judge who, years ago, had clearly been paid a substantial sum to close the case surrounding the death of the Titicharoenrak family. Someone had negotiated with him, which meant that his father either knew the intermediary who could lead them further — or knew who the real client was. And Nattawat already had an idea of how to try to force the truth out of him.

“So what happens now?” Norawit asks carefully, unable to bring himself to look up at him.

“What do you mean?” Nattawat replies, surprised.

“Well…” Norawit hesitates, then exhales heavily. “You’re probably really angry at me. Phu will hate me. He’ll think all of this is my fault.”

Nattawat studies him for a few seconds with quiet sympathy, then gently shakes his head. He walks over, sits on the wide armrest of the old chair beside him, and wraps an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close like a small child.

“You’re an idiot, Norawit Titicharoenrak,” he says softly, pressing a tender kiss to the crown of his head.

“I know.”

“One second can change our entire lives, and we don’t always have control over that. Believe me, I tried to protect you when I had three full seconds to act — and still I couldn’t. After everything that happened, I realized once again that we really don’t have time. Think about what we had in our hands just a few days ago — and what we have now,” Nattawat says quietly, letting out a weary breath. “There are about seven billion people on this planet. Somewhere, someone is making the most important decision of their life. Someone else is paying for their mistakes, like you. Someone is lying in a hospital bed, fighting to survive this very second, like Pahn. Someone is crying in fear, praying for the life of the person they love, like Phuwin. Someone is lying to themselves, pretending they’re not in love because of their own fears and psychological wounds, like North. Someone is desperately trying to reach another person’s heart, ready to change their entire life for them, like Night. Someone simply dreams that life will get better, that everything will return to normal, like Satang. And someone is trying to survive deep grief and accept yet another painful loss, like I am.”

He pauses, gathering his thoughts.

“Most people live without thinking about what will happen to them in five minutes. Until our friend died, we lived exactly the same way. Everything that has fallen on your shoulders is

only part of your path. And if you still don't understand why I'm saying all this, let me explain. Norawit, our life is made of moments. Each of them matters in its own way. Some are good, some are terrible. Some are joyful, others heartbreaking. Some are simple, others unforgettable. But all of them together make up our life — and who we are. Some leave behind bright memories. Others teach us painful but necessary lessons, so that we don't stumble the same way again. Because when we're born, no one tells us how to live correctly. No one truly knows. Everyone makes mistakes, even the greatest people. But do you know what's important? We must value every single moment, no matter what it is. We never get a second chance at living."

"Wow… you're incredible," Norawit whispers, lost in his words.

Nattawat smiles faintly and rests his chin atop Norawit's head.

"You know, sometimes you need to take things more simply instead of destroying yourself with guilt. We can't control everything in this life. You don't need to dig endlessly into the reasons — you just need to live through it and let it go. I understand why you blame yourself, but honestly — was it you who killed him? Did you shoot Pond? Did you wound Pahn and Phuwin? Did you give the order?"

"No."

"That's why your direct fault ends there. You're only guilty of one thing — getting involved in this mess and hiding the truth from us. And even that is understandable," Nattawat says gently, stroking his hair. "So learn the lesson and don't repeat the mistake. Next time, don't hide anything."

"I just thought I could find everything out first and then tell you. And what did I actually learn? Nothing. That someone hated my father — probably for deeply personal reasons — I already knew. That the case was deliberately buried, I understood too. The only thing I managed to uncover was the client's name. But finding out who he really is? That's practically impossible. I should have known something like this would have consequences."

"But you couldn't have known they'd be this bad. That it wouldn't be just you under fire — but all of us," Nattawat says softly. "I think you were trying to protect us, but things simply went wrong."

"Yeah," Norawit scoffs bitterly. "Try telling that to Phuwin, who nearly died, lost his best friend, and almost lost the woman he loves."

"He'll understand. Cypher is your best friend. Do you really think he's capable of hating you?"

"I don't know, but—"

"He's not. Maybe at first he'll react sharply, but he'll calm down. Everything will be okay. I'm sure of it. For now, let's not say anything. We don't know enough yet anyway. Let the funeral pass peacefully. Let everyone cool off a little. Then we'll tell them — and in the meantime, we'll try to find out more."

“I know they all deserve the truth. But then North will find out I was digging into our parents’ deaths. He’ll lose his mind.”

“And why do you think he doesn’t deserve the truth? They were his parents too.”

“This whole story has been a painful trigger for him for years. He can’t even talk about our family calmly — he spirals instantly. I don’t want him breaking down because of this.”

“We still don’t know anything, so we can keep it from him for now. The others will understand. But when we finally find out who Hwang is, you can decide for yourself whether North should know or not.”

“Yeah… maybe you’re right. But how do we even find out? I have no idea where to go from here.”

“I have one idea. I just need a little time so I don’t go in empty-handed.”

“I’ve waited nine years. I can wait a little longer,” Titicharoenrak says quietly.

“I’m not sure it’s worth the price,” Nattawat replies, “but I’ll do everything I can.”

One month later

The smell of burnt rubber in the air had become as familiar to Titicharoenrak as the scent of the watermelon shower gel he always used. The shriek of tires haunted him both in his sleep and while awake — even when he was busy working in the garage, he could still hear it ringing in his ears. The sequences of movements he had drilled into muscle memory for extreme driving stunts had turned into a daily ritual after every shift. Grueling training had become his new normal.

The race was drawing closer with merciless inevitability. At any moment, he could receive an invitation to the qualifying stage, and every phone call made him flinch. To be honest, he was already desperate for it to start — and for all this hell to finally be over. Even though he wasn’t a hundred percent confident in himself, the waiting alone was driving him insane.

Life had changed drastically over these weeks. The only truly comforting thing was Pahn’s recovery. She had nearly returned to normal after that horrific attack and was already back home under close supervision. She was undergoing rehabilitation, and Phuwin was helping her through it. But some things had changed forever. Without Pond, everything felt different. No one had gotten used to the fact that he was gone, but time kept moving forward. It healed, slowly. You just had to let it.

It was strange racing on this track without its owner. Now Nattawat was in charge of the place — a logical decision, since he was considered the best racer on the Loop. The choice had been nearly unanimous, and now the responsibility for this beloved sanctuary rested on his shoulders.

He continued training Norawit, growing more and more proud of him with each passing day. Norawit now drove with ease, entered corners smoothly, and executed maneuvers he hadn’t

even understood before. Objectively, he was as ready for the race as one could possibly be in such a short time. He had done an enormous amount of work on himself and his driving skills — the progress was colossal. Starting almost from scratch, he had reached an impressively high level.

At some point, Titicharoenrak stopped seeing training as work. He discovered the sheer thrill of being behind the wheel, and only when he loosened his tight grip on control did he begin to truly enjoy the process. Now he loved racing. He craved the wild adrenaline and the fierce excitement surging through his veins whenever he tried to overtake Nattawat in their improvised races. He had never managed to beat him — but he always came dangerously close. His trainer never went easy on him, and Norawit was grateful for it. He needed to know his real level.

Nattawat still rarely praised him, showing approval only through subtle gestures or a fleeting smile. He was patient and demanding — but inside, everything in him celebrated every small victory Norawit achieved.

Thanks to intense training, Norawit could now easily speak the language of drifting terms and instantly understand what Nattawat meant when he asked him to repeat certain elements. Today they were racing side by side, their favorite format lately. It was always thrilling and unpredictable to compete against the strongest opponent. The challenge was to anticipate Nattawat's movements and adapt to them in real time.

They had already completed two laps on the Loop, but it was hard to declare a clear winner — each of them was brilliant in their own way.

"One more. The deciding one," Nattawat's voice crackled through the speakers in Norawit's sports car.

"Maybe we should just admit it's a draw? I'm on fire today," Norawit laughed, shifting gears.

"You'll never beat me. Accept it, loser."

Nattawat surged forward, launching into another lap. They repeated their duel — each taking the lead in turn. Nattawat pulled ahead first, Norawit chasing close behind, then they switched roles. Both drove with emotion, but absolute precision, fully in control of the track.

When the Mustang reached the first corner, Nattawat initiated a furious furidashi, throwing the car into an aggressive drift. He set the pace for the entire run — the first entry into the turn after the straight was crucial. His car slid sideways in a spectacular arc, tires shrieking, black marks streaking across the asphalt, while Norawit's Porsche mirrored him almost perfectly.

Their cars moved like twins, just meters apart, synchronized and sharp. From the outside, it looked breathtaking. Nattawat made no mistakes — and that was exactly what he taught Norawit. Together, they carved through the corner, white smoke billowing from beneath the tires, then slammed the gas on the straight. Norawit drew level, riding nose-to-nose.

At first, it had felt strange racing without crowds, but now he loved these private sessions. And driving Damian's brand-new car was an entirely different pleasure. It responded just as smoothly as the Mustang. Norawit had adapted quickly and now felt completely at home in it — nimble, obedient, and feral when pushed hard.

"Stop shaking your ass like that, baby," Norawit laughed, tailing Nattawat's movements.

"I thought you liked it when I shake it," Nattawat smirked, trying to pull ahead.

"When it's your ass, I like everything. But I'm talking about the car."

"Oh, that?" Nattawat swerved sharply, blocking another attempt to pass.

"Exactly."

"Just give up, sweetheart. You'll never win."

"I enjoy trying. You get such an interesting mood after adrenaline hits — you pounce on me like a maniac."

"I wouldn't mind doing that right now."

"If I win, I'm absolutely spreading you over the hood of my new car. We haven't tried that one yet — only your Mustang."

"You're trying to seduce me into losing."

"Maybe that's my strategy. Just imagine how perfect it'll be, huh?" Norawit purred. "How well your body will slide over it while I fuck you out of your mind—"

"Shut up, God! I'm going to crash into the barrier!"

"Are you hard?"

"No," Nattawat laughed.

"Liar. I know you get turned on just thinking about sex with me."

"And you?"

"Since the start — when you shook your ass so sexily."

"Idiot," Nattawat snorted.

At full speed, he suddenly threw the Mustang into a brutal negative-angle drift. Norawit braked slightly, swerving aside, unsure what the hell he was attempting. From the outside, it looked impossible to recover — but this was Nattawat. Perfect inertia, wheel counter-steer, and flawless throttle control snapped the car back into line.

Norawit seized the moment, surging past.

“Showing off?” he teased.

“Did it work?” Nattawat grinned.

“Looked damn impressive — but I’m not the clueless idiot I used to be.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

“Want to compare sizes?” Norawit laughed, accelerating. “Relax, mine’s bigger.”

“Oh please — you said yourself mine’s no pinky,” Nattawat smirked.

“Get ready, I’m taking you today.”

“You don’t even know half of what I can do.”

“I’m very familiar with your talents.”

“Then it’s time to remind you.”

Nattawat burst ahead before the final turn.

The Mustang executed his signature stunt — a maneuver spectators adored, but no one dared replicate. A savage sideways drift brought his rear bumper within mere centimeters of the barrier, almost kissing it, before he floored the gas and snapped back into line.

It was flawless. Smoke poured from beneath the tires as he rocketed out of the turn, blasting across the finish line.

Norawit crossed seconds later, braking beside him.

He hadn’t won — but he felt no disappointment. Racing someone like Nattawat was pure pleasure. He knew he would lose again. But striving for more, pushing his limits — that was everything.

And Nattawat? Nattawat knew exactly how to keep that bar sky-high.

Norawit steps outside and leans against his car, studying the dark, overcast sky. Not even a single star is visible tonight. For the first time in a long while, storm clouds have finally gathered, and the unbearable heat has dropped by at least ten degrees. For more than a month, all of California has been suffocating under brutal drought and scorching temperatures, yet every thunderstorm seems to bypass Los Angeles. Even the use of drinking water has now been restricted to conserve it.

Norawit lights a cigarette and watches the guy climbing out of the Mustang. The dark-haired beauty who belongs to him makes his head spin with nothing more than his appearance. The familiar plaid shirt hangs open over a loose white tank top, and ripped jeans perfectly highlight his long legs. He’s so devastatingly gorgeous that just the thought of how much time they spend together, never tiring of one another, sends a hot coil of desire straight to Norawit’s lower stomach.

Nattawat stretches lazily from side to side, then strolls toward him, heavy boots scuffing softly against the asphalt. He stops right at the hood of Norawit's car and leans back against it with an infuriatingly tempting sway of his hips, a smug grin playing on his lips.

"You lost again, loser," he says, tilting his head slightly and crossing his arms.

"Yeah, but I was pretty good, wasn't I?" Norawit replies, taking a deep drag. "You can lose with dignity, you know."

"Well…" Nattawat shrugs doubtfully. "I don't know about that. Your driving's still pretty average, honestly. Your technique is sloppy, your reaction time isn't great, and your lines are messy."

"Messy," Norawit echoes softly, stepping closer. "So, messy?"

"Yeah," Nattawat answers, lifting his chin arrogantly.

"Maybe it's because you're a bad teacher."

"I doubt it. I'm an excellent teacher."

"I have serious doubts about that."

"You've come a long way from zero thanks to me, by the way."

"That's not the point. A good teacher praises their students for progress and scolds them for mistakes."

"Don't I praise you?" Nattawat asks, slowly dragging his gaze over Norawit from head to toe.

'Not bad. Let's start over' doesn't count," Norawit says, closing the distance between them with a single step.

Nattawat exhales sharply as the space between them disappears. The tension instantly spikes. The heat between them never fades for even a second. They're like glowing embers — all it takes is a breath of air, and the fire flares up again. And when Norawit provokes him this blatantly, invading his personal space, resistance becomes impossible.

Nattawat smirks, hops up onto the hood, and spreads his legs, leaning back on his palms. For a few seconds, he simply watches Norawit, head tilted, his gaze roaming over his face, neck, chest, then slowly licking his lips.

"So you really want me to praise you?" he asks.

"It'd be nice to hear it from you. I've earned it."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

“Then come here,” Nattawat whispers, crooking his finger invitingly.

Norawit steps closer without hesitation. His hands slide slowly over Nattawat’s firm thighs before gripping them hard and pulling him close. Nattawat presses his groin forward, letting out a heavy breath as he feels Norawit’s arousal. He hooks an arm around his neck and whispers into his ear, drawing out every word:

“You’re a complete loser.”

“Son of a bitch,” Norawit mutters, laughing.

“I said I’d praise you when you deserve it. If you didn’t hear it, then you’re still not good enough.”

“So I need to try harder?”

“Much harder,” Nattawat whispers, kissing along his neck, trailing wet, teasing kisses from his shoulder to his ear. “Work on your weak spots, improve your technique…”

“My technique is bad?”

“Sometimes,” Nattawat says, leaving slow kisses along his collarbone.

“What else is wrong? Speed? Precision?”

“You’re perfect there,” Nattawat smirks, slipping his hands under Norawit’s shirt.

“Are you seducing me, Natt?”

“Does it look like that?” he asks innocently, sliding his palms up Norawit’s chest.

“Yes,” Norawit smiles, breathing out softly.

“You know how adrenaline affects me. I completely lose control. I have to let off steam on someone.”

“You dirty pervert. Maybe I should really bend you over the hood and fuck you properly.”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Nattawat says, rubbing his hardening length against Norawit through the denim.

Norawit takes another drag, pulling the smoke deep into his lungs. He holds it, then grabs Nattawat by the jaw and yanks him close. Nattawat closes his eyes, anticipating a kiss, wrapping his arms around his neck — but Norawit only exhales the bitter smoke straight into his mouth, drags his tongue lazily across his lips, and pulls away.

Nattawat stares at him, stunned and annoyed.

“What the—”

“Sorry, baby. I wanted to do that as the winner. Since I’m the loser, I should probably go train more,” Norawit says smugly, stepping back.

“Wait—wait. Fine,” Nattawat stops him, hooking his legs around his hips.

“What?”

“I’ll admit you’re pretty damn good.”

“Not convincing. You’re just saying that to get my dick,” Norawit scoffs.

“No, really. You’re trying, and I see it.”

“Still not convincing.”

“What do you want?”

“An honest evaluation of my efforts.”

“And then?” Nattawat asks, studying his face.

Norawit leans in and kisses him.

Nattawat parts his lips instantly, letting his tongue in. A low moan slips from his chest as Norawit grips the back of his head and pulls him closer, their breathing growing uneven. Desire ignites, blazing hot inside him. Their tongues clash in a wet, hungry kiss, just as fiercely as their cars had moments before, while Norawit’s hands roam shamelessly over his body, sending waves of goosebumps across his heated skin.

Nattawat shifts against the warm metal, anticipation tightening every nerve, as Norawit’s fingers reach his belt and quickly undo it. He pulls him closer to the edge, forces him upright, then spins him around and bends him forward. Nattawat braces his palms against the hood, legs spread, as Norawit grabs his hips and drags him back. He grinds his hard length against Nattawat through layers of fabric, slow but firm, making them both gasp.

“And then?” Nattawat repeats breathlessly.

Norawit leans over him, hot breath brushing his ear, tongue tracing the skin behind it.

“You’ll get exactly what you want.”

“You want me too,” Nattawat protests, trying to turn, but Norawit holds him in place. “So what kind of game are you playing?”

“I need something from you. Praise me properly. It’s simple.”

“I already did.”

“Do you want to play dumb, Natt?” Norawit murmurs with a low chuckle, thrusting his hips forward slightly, pressing his length against Nattawat’s ass while sliding a hand into his

loosened jeans. “Look what you’re missing. You could already be underneath me, falling apart.”

He tugs his jeans and underwear down just enough to free himself, then wraps his palm around Nattawat's cock, stroking it a few times with a firm grip. Nattawat shudders, gasping audibly. He's so aroused now that even this gentle touch sends his body into overdrive. Norawit starts grinding against his ass through his clothes, his movements slow but deliberate, while his hand works Nattawat's hard shaft with growing urgency. He traces the head with his thumb, spreading the beads of pre-cum, and Nattawat lets out a heavy moan.

"Does praise turn you on?" Nattawat asks, eyes half-closed, biting his lip.

"Or maybe I've got a praise kink just for you? It's so rare, like rain in a Los Angeles drought. Come on, tell me."

"You're doing great."

"Not convincing," Norawit replies, pressing against him from all angles. "Look, you're wasting time. I could've been balls deep inside you by now."

"God, what do you want from me?" Nattawat groans in frustration, trying to look back, but Norawit grabs his hair and forces him forward. "What am I supposed to say to satisfy you?"

"Think carefully," the devil whispers in his ear, then turns his face toward him and kisses him hard and demanding.

He pulls him so close Nattawat can feel every curve of his perfect body against his skin. His hot breath that melts him. That faint watermelon scent that makes him want to devour him. The rapid heartbeat that drowns out all other sounds. And the heat from his hands that makes him tremble again and again. Everything inside him pulses wildly. Norawit's tongue works his mouth with such relentless force that taking a breath becomes difficult. Then he abruptly breaks the prolonged kiss and shoves him back against the Porsche hood. The car sits low, creating the perfect position for Norawit, who gently strokes his back.

Nattawat braces himself against the hot metal beneath him. His legs are straight and taut, his back arched in a graceful curve that gives his boyfriend access to all his vulnerable spots. Norawit slowly removes his jeans, then kneels and caresses his ass. Nattawat tenses, knowing what comes next—the strike. A sharp slap echoes, and he moans softly, eyes squeezed shut. Then follows a tender kiss.

This exquisite torture begins again. Strike. Caress. Kiss. Each time he closes his eyes against the sweet pain, swallowing his cries since this depravity happens on an empty track. He loses count of the blows. His ass burns fiercely, probably as red as China's flag. Even the lightest touch makes him flinch and whimper.

"Thought of anything, baby?" Norawit finally asks.

"I think so," the other manages, knees trembling from the strain. "I like your progress. You're not the best racer yet, but you're getting close."

"Better, but still not there."

"What?!"

Nattawat's outraged cry dissolves into a guttural moan as he throws his head back, feeling Norawit's tongue begin its bold exploration. The man grips his ass firmly, spreading his cheeks for better access. This torture is even more intense than before. His tongue licks with such hunger and desperation that Nattawat can't suppress his cries. He arches and writhes, vision blurring from overwhelming arousal.

Norawit is performing some beautiful obscenity on him. First teasing the entrance with his tongue tip, then circling it with broad strokes. When he buries his face deeper, he gently bites the tender skin. Nattawat struggles to stay standing. Broken, pleading whispers fall from his parted lips. He begs him to continue, moaning shamelessly when he feels a wet finger enter him. It slides in slowly, then withdraws just as gradually while Norawit kisses his ass cheek. He knows his partner dislikes slow teasing, so he smirks when Nattawat begins pushing back against his hand.

Norawit adds more fingers, and Nattawat starts riding them wildly. He rises to his feet, continuing to press against that sensitive spot inside him. This makes Nattawat cry out repeatedly, his body flushing with heat each time. With one hand, Norawit massages his prostate while the other strokes his bare thigh. He senses when Nattawat is about to explode from orgasm and immediately stops, withdrawing his fingers.

"I'm still not hearing any praise," he smirks, eyeing the curve of his back.

"Damn you!" Nattawat protests with an annoyed groan. "Who does this?!"

"Praise me and you'll get whatever you want," Norawit says, softly stroking his lower back.

"God, I hate you!"

"I could stop right here if you want."

"No, don't! Fine, damn it. You're doing beautifully with training, really. I didn't expect you to catch on so quickly. I'm even... God, I don't even know what I'm saying."

"Now that's more convincing," Norawit replies, gently wrapping his fist around Nattawat's cock, then slowly sliding it all the way in. "Continue."

"Honestly, I didn't think you'd manage anything. But right from the first training session, you were amazing. If it weren't for your persistence and stubbornness, we wouldn't have come this far."

"So this is all my achievement?" the other raises an eyebrow, bringing him to orgasm with his hand.

"Damn it. Mostly," Nattawat whispers breathlessly, squeezing his eyes shut. "God, I'm coming, don't stop, baby."

"I'm not quite satisfied yet," Norawit says and suddenly releases his cock from his grasp.

"Fuck you, you damn ass! Get the hell away, Titicharoenrak!" Nattawat yells furiously, hitting the hood in frustration.

"Ooh, you're so hot when you're angry," he smiles.

"What do you want from me?! What else should I say?! That I'm pleased with you? Yes! That I enjoy training with you? Yes! That I'm proud of you? Yes! That you have a chance to beat me someday? Yes, damn it! You're a worthy opponent for me!" Nattawat shouts.

He breathes heavily from anger and disappointment after his denied pleasure, still in the same position. He hears Norawit unzip his pants, then his wet cock slides across his burning skin. Easily and dominantly, he spreads his legs wider, pushing them apart with his knee, and Nattawat freezes in anticipation. Norawit spits generously on his cock and strokes the head a few times with his palm, then leans forward and presses it between his cheeks. Nattawat's mouth goes completely dry from how desperately he feels the need to have him inside him fully. Every damn inch that would tear him apart and stretch him pleasurably.

It's unbearable. His muscles cramp painfully from unbearable desire, and everything in his lower abdomen churns with excitement. He's practically ready to howl in relief like a beaten animal when he feels Norawit finally slowly entering him. A hot languor instantly spreads through his body, making his blood boil in his veins. Nattawat gasps intermittently and pushes back against his hips. Small sparks of pain flash in his eyes, but he closes his eyelids and bites his lower lip hard.

Norawit moves very smoothly and carefully, penetrating only halfway, then slides his hand along his arched back and buries his fingers in the hair at his nape. He grips them and pulls back sharply, forcing the other to lift his head, turning it toward himself. He leans forward and freezes just centimeters from his lips.

"See, all you had to do was admit it out loud," Norawit whispers smugly.

"Fuck you," Nattawat says and kisses him wildly himself.

He reaches back and grabs his neck, continuing to moan into his lips as Norawit moves his hips smoothly, penetrating deeper with each thrust. Every thrust responds with a pleasant stirring in Nattawat's lower abdomen and tingling in his fingertips. Norawit runs his palm along his thigh and lifts his leg. He makes him brace his knee and palms against the hood to assume a comfortable position, then starts moving faster. So harshly, as if he'd been waiting for the moment to release his inner beast. He grabs Nattawat's shoulder and moves him to meet his movements. Their bodies crash against each other like waves of the Pacific Ocean against a rocky shore.

Harsh, intermittent cries mixed with ragged breaths escape Nattawat's lips, while Norawit groans deeply. Both couldn't care less how they look right now or what would happen if someone noticed them. Each time they completely disconnect from their surroundings and feel no shame whatsoever. Nattawat just tries to maintain balance on trembling legs while taking Norawit's cock, completely surrendering to him, while Norawit continues to bring them both to orgasm, burning with his own body heat.

The clothing is so obstructive that you want to tear it off, yet at the same time it's so exciting, as if they're hiding from someone and hastily trying to give each other extraordinary pleasure. Among all the indecent sounds at this moment, the light jingle of Norawit's unbuckled belt, swaying with his sharp movements, somehow seems the most sensual. The man holds Nattawat tightly, his fingers gripping the soft fabric of his black-and-white shirt on his shoulder, and with quick thrusts of his powerful hips, makes him scream louder.

Suddenly he feels large, cool drops on his arms, which instantly bring an indescribable sense of relief. It's as if steam and a hissing sound are coming from his skin right now, exactly like when water hits red-hot iron, because of the fire burning everything inside.

The drops become more and more numerous, beginning to drum calmly on the car and soak their clothes. He raises his head to the sky and closes his eyes with a deep sigh as the rain intensifies. He can't suppress a joyful smile and a moan of relaxation. After a long time, even the sky has taken pity on them and couldn't hold back. This rain seems to bring some calm with it, washing away all the pain and sorrow that had accumulated during these difficult weeks. The drought is finally officially over, and perhaps this is a good sign.

Such a heavy downpour begins that due to the dense wall, almost nothing is visible around, and Nattawat's loud moans drown in the rustle of this stream. The man starts sliding on the wet hood, barely holding on while Norawit rhythmically enters him. He spreads his fingers, trying to grab onto something, but it's so difficult. His arms are already numb from fatigue, and his legs become like cotton from the tantalizing pleasure constantly running through his whole body. It strives to break free. He needs to do it as soon as possible, otherwise it could tear him apart or burn him to ashes.

Norawit suddenly stops and sharply turns him to face himself. He lifts him into his arms and shifts slightly to the side for convenience. Nattawat immediately wraps his arms around his shoulders and throws his head back with a loud cry as he enters him again with one sharp movement. Norawit slowly runs his hot fingers along his leg and lifts it under the knee, while his other palm slides along his back. His hand rests on the back of the other's neck, then squeezes it tightly, making his hair stand on end. He continues to enter him quickly and powerfully, breathing heavily in his ear and slightly squinting from the stream of rain. Nattawat chaotically and sloppily slides his lips along his perfect jaw, covered by numerous streams of water. Small goosebumps run across his skin from the hot breath on his neck, creating an incredibly pleasant contrast with the cool rain.

He feels nothing but the searing knot in his lower abdomen, expanding with each new thrust. The orgasm builds exponentially with every passing second. Nattawat seizes his lips, boldly plunging his tongue into his mouth. A prolonged moan of satisfaction escapes the other's chest in response, while his fingers grip his neck painfully. He tightens his leg around his waist, pressing him closer, and Norawit immediately accelerates his rhythm.

The downpour drums powerfully against their skin, making it melt like wax before a flame. Nattawat's body slides against the wet metal as Norawit holds him so tightly that small bruises begin to form. He's so overwhelmed by his own emotions and sensations that breathing becomes unbearable. His head spins from pleasure. His heart hammers in his throat, limbs tense to the point of cramping, and his soul fills with extraordinary tenderness and warmth. Nattawat places a wet palm against his cheek, gently tracing his thumb across his parted lips, heavy with breathing. Norawit smiles softly, gazing at him with love, then kisses his finger, once again demonstrating an extraordinary level of tenderness.

Over the past month, Norawit has so often told him how much he loves him, and Nattawat always responds with that particular phrase that has become their special acknowledgment. Only they understand this expression, which literally means in their head-over-heels-in-love language: "and I love you too, but I can't say it out loud." This always sounds so tender and special to both of them. Norawit likes it, but of course, it's not quite the same. He needs something else. He never speaks of this and truly demands nothing in return, but Nattawat

wants to tell him. And it seems he's ready to do so. If not him, then who else deserves his crazy feelings?

"Baby," he whispers.

"Hm?" the other responds, lifting his gaze momentarily to his.

"I..." Nattawat stammers, nervously swallowing the lump in his throat, "I love you."

For exactly one moment, Norawit loses himself at these words and freezes, disconnected from reality, but then resumes entering him and smiles joyfully. He's happy. These words are like this cool downpour during a long drought. Finally, he's hearing this from him for the first time. He grabs his jaw and kisses him instead of speaking. So insistently that Nattawat feels another hurricane begin inside him. This is even better than words. Much better, but he wants to hear the response he's heard so many times before. At this very moment, it's so important and necessary to him.

He waits as Norawit kisses him gratefully. Waits as he continues to bring him closer to his long-awaited orgasm, moving his hips quickly. And waits even when he breaks the crazily long kiss and lifts his eyes to the sky, offering his face to the rain. Norawit takes several deep, relieved breaths. He smirks, then slightly shakes his head from side to side, as if unable to believe what he's heard. He cups his face with his palms and covers his lips with his again. This brings a smile to Nattawat's face when he realizes he's simply breathless with happiness.

He held him tightly with his arms around his shoulders and legs around his thighs, afraid to let go for even one damn second. For him, there seemed nothing more precious in life than the person he was pressing so tightly against himself now. His heart, mind, and body belonged completely to him, and after so long, he had found the strength to admit it out loud. Norawit had achieved nearly the impossible for him. He had given him understanding, won his trust, and been honest with him—though the last could use some work, but that minor detail was completely unimportant. The main thing was that he had allowed him to feel loved. He had completely enveloped him with incredible passion and the most fragile tenderness simultaneously. He had opened up to him a whole vast spectrum of different feelings that people could gift each other in relationships, and this was the best gift.

He had shown him what it means to "love" and "to accept love." He had taught him to recognize the difference between these concepts and how important it is to do both in relation to each other. To love and to accept love is, it turns out, not at all simple. And it was he who taught him not to fear loving again, even after causing great pain. Norawit had managed to turn his entire world upside down, and in this moment, Nattawat felt like the happiest person on this damn earth.

The man feels the rapid approach of orgasm, so he abruptly breaks the long kiss and throws his head back, gasping for desired air and drops of long-awaited rain. Suddenly, a powerful explosion occurs inside him, as if with the snap of fingers, and sweet relief instantly spreads through his body in pleasant bliss. Nattawat hangs tiredly on his shoulders and tightens his legs around him. Norawit withdraws, grips his cock firmly, and begins stroking it quickly with his fist, bringing himself to orgasm. He squeezes his eyes shut, pushes his wet hair back, then groans gutturally and comes.

For several seconds afterward, he tries to calm his breathing and watches as raindrops slide across Nattawat's lips and the tip of his nose. It's hard to believe—did he really say he loves him? He had waited so long for these important words from him but tried not to pressure him. It had to happen when the man himself wanted to say it, not because he should. It took him a month to fully accept his feelings and voice them. Is that long? Absolutely unimportant—these waiting times were worth the emotions Norawit was experiencing because of them now. Of course, he had known this perfectly well without explicit acknowledgment, but it was much more pleasant to hear them like this, when they tumbled from beloved lips at their most vulnerable moment of intimacy. They were the most honest. He never said anything just for the sake of it.

"I waited like crazy," Norawit smirks, gently sliding his nose against the other's.

"The rain?" Nattawat asks, smiling as he strokes his shoulders.

"You, silly. I waited for you. If only you knew how much I love you," he replies with a happy smile through the sound of rain, then kisses him.

The detested mansion where Nattawat had spent the darkest years of his adolescence was crowded tonight. Another ostentatious gala thrown by its owner had been dragging on for nearly two hours — though it felt like an eternity. Once again, he had to endure an evening he barely survived every damn time. Around him, wealthy and influential bastards pretended to care about what was happening. If only Norawit were here. He could have brightened up this miserable reception, but his father would never invite someone like him. To Nut, people like Titicharoenrak were nothing but the dregs of society. In truth, even his own son was no better in his eyes — he refused to bend to his influence, didn't wear expensive suits, didn't behave according to the social circle necessary for Nut's career. Everything about Nattawat was wrong, not how he had dreamed it would be. Even Night failed to meet his lofty standards of an "ideal son," let alone ordinary people.

Tonight was different, if only because Nattawat had a purpose: he needed to talk to his father. Usually, he played his role flawlessly, then left without even saying goodbye, getting as far away from this place as possible. But this time, avoiding that conversation wasn't an option. For once, he needed it.

He hadn't wasted time lately — he'd been helping Norawit search for information about his family, about who had killed them. He hadn't fed him false hope or shared scraps of half-baked facts. He'd simply kept digging on his own, patiently, relentlessly. It was incredibly difficult. Almost everything was buried under layers of darkness, the trails blurred and tangled. Still, there was one solid lead.

A man standing in the backyard among the guests.

He looked like a well-fed predator — and in truth, that was exactly what he was. Despite his age, he was still in good shape: tall, muscular, black hair streaked with silver, deep lines at the corners of his eyes, a gaunt face with sharply defined cheekbones. If Nattawat didn't know him so well, he might have believed that fake smile Nut so generously gave everyone around him. But unfortunately, he was his son.

Why did life mock him and Night so cruelly? Was it not enough that they'd been born to a mother plagued by psychological illness and alcoholism? Did fate really have to add a father who was a monster?

He was a sadist — at least emotionally. This bastard had spent his entire life savoring other people's pain. It was painfully obvious if you watched how he treated his sons when no important guests were around. His true self existed only behind closed doors. Nut's hypocrisy made Nattawat nauseous. There he stood, smiling kindly at his guests, playing the benevolent host, like some twisted version of Mother Teresa, while in reality he was nothing but corrupt filth. But why be surprised? Everyone here was a hypocrite — including Nattawat himself.

Being in this place made him physically sick. He hated pretending, making polite conversation, playing the good son, listening to mind-numbing talk about money and business. He hated everything about this. And yet, he kept coming back. Maybe that made him no better than his father.

“You’re going to burn a hole through him with that stare,” Night murmured, adjusting the collar of his pristine white shirt. “I know you hate him, but try to relax. Get a grip.”

Nattawat slowly shifted his mocking gaze from his father to his younger brother and curved his lips into a faint smile. As always, they had retreated to the second-floor hall, watching the event through the large window, desperate for a moment to breathe. They’d pretended to have urgent business, just to escape the suffocating atmosphere.

Unlike Nattawat, Night seemed calmer in this environment. He’d long grown accustomed to Nut’s empty parades, though he had countless reasons of his own to despise both this world and this man. Pain was one of them. All his father had ever given him was pain — physical and emotional. He couldn’t stay near him for long without old memories rising to the surface, devouring his mind, stealing his control.

Blows to the face. Pleas for mercy. The whistle of a belt slicing through the air. The crack of impact. Skin blooming red, then purple with bruises. Blood. Mocking laughter. *You are nothing. Every second of your life, you’ll behave the way I want. Remember one rule in this house: you belong to me.* Another vicious strike. The buckle carving scars into tender flesh, one of them forever etched across his shoulder blade. And then — the suffocating loneliness once his father left.

Night shut his eyes, drawing in a shaky breath, forcing the memories away. Humiliation, insults, punishment, violence — that was his childhood. It had become so normal he’d learned to live with it. Even though fear made his hands tremble every time his father came home, some twisted part of him still loved him. He flinched at the sound of his own name, knowing Nut would always vent his anger on him after a hard day, and yet he still waited for him. Because no one else ever paid him any attention. His father had isolated him from the world. He still remembered how his fingers went numb with pain, how he couldn’t even scream, because that would only make it worse.

Though he’d left the mansion long ago, those wounds were still open, festering. And every time he returned, he felt like that helpless child again — forgotten, unprotected. Only his older brother had ever saved him.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Nattawat asked quietly, noticing his pallor. “You’ve gone pale.”

“I’m fine,” Night nodded, exhaling heavily. “Just remembered some shit. I hate this place.”

“Yeah. Me too. Can you do something for me tonight?” Nattawat asked, taking a slow drag from his cigarette. His father would have killed him for smoking inside the house — which only made it more satisfying. “I need to talk to him.”

“You think this is the right time?”

“Perfect,” Nattawat replied with a crooked smile, exhaling a dense cloud of smoke.

“Why?”

“There are too many people here he cares about. His precious connections. His influence. He’s terrified of losing his spotless reputation. He won’t make a scene in front of them — but he won’t be able to dodge my questions either.”

“What are you trying to find out?”

“The truth about the deaths of Norawit and North’s parents. As much as I can. It’s risky, but I have to try.”

“So all of this is for them?” Night frowned. “Why? Why can’t your boyfriend just let it go?”

“Would you let it go if it were our mother?” Nattawat asked quietly. “Do you really believe she died by accident? That day, she wasn’t drunk enough to die so stupidly.”

“But we have the autopsy report.”

“And you trust it? You think it’s hard to bribe a coroner when judges take bribes every day?”

“I think you’re looking for a problem where there isn’t one.”

“Maybe. But that’s not the point. Two people were murdered brutally, and no one paid for it. Is that fair?”

“You know Norawit will kill whoever did it,” Night said. “He’ll go to prison for revenge.”

“I won’t stop him.”

“Don’t you love him?”

“That’s exactly why I won’t,” Nattawat replied firmly. “I want him to choose for himself. If he kills, I’ll wait for him. If he forgives, I’ll be proud of him. I don’t care what’s right. I just want him to find peace.”

“I don’t know whether to admire you or be terrified,” Night muttered. “I understand you, but… is this really right?”

“The man you love suffers every single day. He drowns the pain in drugs and alcohol. He gets beaten half to death in the ring almost daily. Pain is all he knows — and people did that to him. No one is born broken, brother. North was broken. So were you. And Norawit was destroyed by the bastard who murdered his parents — and that man is still free. Do you think that’s fair?”

“…No.”

“Then help me. If one filthy creature who kills innocents disappears, the world might actually become better. I don’t want Norawit’s hands stained, but if it brings him relief, I won’t stand in his way.”

“Why are you so calm about him wanting to kill someone?”

“Someone?” Nattawat scoffed. “That thing isn’t human. Anyone capable of that forfeits the right to be called one. Their father didn’t deserve to die. Their mother was just caught in the crossfire. Someone has to pay. And we’ll find him. So, will you help me?”

“What do I do?”

“Distract the guests. I need about ten minutes.”

“Alright. But Nattawat,” Night said, grabbing his arm. “No stupid moves. He’s still our father. For me, keep it together.”

“Only for you,” Nattawat replied softly, nodding before heading toward the stairs.

He goes down to the first floor, weaving past a crowd of unfamiliar faces in expensive suits and couture dresses. If he cared about the elite of Los Angeles or followed politics, he would probably know each of them by name and sight. At first glance, they all look unbearably fake, just like the perfect smiles crafted by the city’s best dentists. Soft music hums in the background, glasses clink, voices overlap, and quiet laughter drifts through the air. People stand in small clusters, discussing something of enormous importance from their dazzling social lives.

The sickly stench of alcohol makes him grimace as it hits his nose, but he forces himself to endure it, continuing his search. Everything here is disgusting and artificial. The massive house, the flawless lawn, the designer gowns, the costly jewelry, the elite liquor, the heavy perfume, the cigar smoke, the music, the people, even the air itself — all of it fills him with revulsion. Nattawat wants nothing more than to get the hell out of here as fast as possible.

Finally, he spots his father, deep in conversation with an influential man in a gray suit. Straightening his posture, Nattawat walks toward them, casually adjusting his perfectly styled hair. Nut catches the hostile set of his son’s expression and instantly tenses, though he keeps his face perfectly composed. One look into those dark eyes is enough to tell him there will be no polite small talk. As always, determination and hatred burn in the brown irises. He’s used to that look — his eldest son has always stared at him like he’s nothing but filth.

“We need to talk,” Nattawat says flatly, stopping beside them.

Annoyance flashes across Nut’s face before he turns back to his guest, offering an apologetic smile and slipping on his mask of cordial charm.

“I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Hale. This is my son. He can be a bit tactless at times. Difficult temper — I spoiled him too much,” he says smoothly.

“God,” Nattawat mutters under his breath, rolling his eyes at the hypocrisy.

“Kids,” the man in gray laughs, taking a sip of his drink. “I get it. I’ve got a son his age. Can barely handle him.”

“Yes, they’re difficult at this stage. Always proving a point, with or without reason.”

“Can you stop? I’m right here. I need to speak to you,” Nattawat insists, drilling his father with a fierce stare.

“Let me finish this conversation, and we’ll talk later.”

“Give me ten minutes of your precious time. That’s not too much, is it? Considering how much time you spent on me over the—”

“Fine,” Nut snaps, then instantly softens his expression for the guest. “Please excuse me, Mr. Hale. Family matters must always come first. We’ll continue later. Enjoy the evening.”

They step aside, and Nut grips Nattawat’s elbow, dragging him toward the house while maintaining a polite smile and nodding at passing guests. With every step, his fingers dig in harder, his fury unmistakable. He pulls him into his study, shoves him inside, and slams the door shut.

Nattawat takes a few slow steps forward, smirking. He’s always enjoyed pushing his father to the edge.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, you little bastard?” Nut hisses, glaring at him. “Do you even know who I was talking to?”

“The illegitimate son of Princess Diana?” Nattawat arches a brow. “Hardly seems more important than actual royalty, Dad. Relax.”

“Keep talking smart and see what happens. That was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. You never turn people like that away.”

“Oh, of course. You’d know better than anyone who you need to bend over for — and who you get to screw afterward. You’re a real expert in that field,” Nattawat chuckles softly, crossing his arms.

“Shut your filthy mouth before I shut it for you,” Nut snaps, sinking into his chair.

“What, grounding me?” Nattawat mocks.

“God, I hate you,” Nut mutters, rubbing his eyes. “What do you want? Make it quick.”

Nattawat deliberately circles the study, letting his gaze roam, before perching on the edge of his father’s desk. His eyes burn into the man who gave him life, and a storm of conflicting emotions churns inside him.

It isn’t quite hatred. More like a deep, corrosive incomprehension. Why did this man have to be his biological father? Why did such a bastard give him his genes? Why is there nothing between them but hostility? He’ll never know. No one will ever give him those answers.

In truth, he has little reason to hate him. Nut didn’t raise him, didn’t ruin his life, didn’t shatter his mind the way he did to his other child. He deserved Nattawat’s hatred for his indifference. But how can you blame someone for not loving you if they never wanted you at

all? And for all his cruelty, Nut never beat him like he beat Night. He tortured him with words instead, far more viciously. To Nut, Nattawat was a constant disappointment.

Maybe it was a blessing that he never raised him. It gave Nattawat one advantage over him for life — he wasn't afraid of him. Unlike his younger brother.

"There's one of your old cases I'm interested in," Nattawat says coolly, peering down at him. "It never went to court due to lack of evidence."

"If it didn't go to court, what does that have to do with me? I'm a judge, not a prosecutor."

"Oh, I think you know exactly why I'm asking you. Let's skip the act. There are no guests here. I know who you are."

"And who is that?" Nut smirks.

"A corrupt, lying piece of shit with no morals or principles. You don't belong in public office. You're only there because you're good at playing both sides, and they don't fully realize who they're dealing with. You cover for bastards like yourself while pretending to be a model citizen — all while pocketing bribes. Doesn't it make you sick?"

Nut merely laughs dryly, running a hand through his hair. He taps his fingers against the mahogany desk, studying his son.

"And don't you disgust yourself? An arrogant, addicted gambler with an inflated ego. You look like trash and act like it. You're a perfect fit for the gutter I pulled you out of. A petty thief and a brawler. Where would you be now if Night hadn't saved your ass back then? Be grateful I managed to reduce your sentence and bury that mess. You were a nuisance."

"So the story about my mother abusing me worked out nicely for you?" Nattawat sneers. "Convenient — blaming everything on my bad character. What a noble act. The poor father rescuing his child from a monstrous alcoholic. Your friends know about that?"

He sweeps his hair aside, exposing a faint pink scar along his hairline — a five-centimeter reminder of a single moment that changed everything.

The one time his father dared to strike him left its mark on both his body and soul. The blow had sent him crashing into a glass table, splitting his head open. It was a miracle he didn't lose an eye or crack his skull. Nine stitches and sheer luck saved him.

"You remember, don't you?" Nattawat says softly, catching the irritation in Nut's eyes. "I do. You saw me bleeding on the floor and stepped right over me. Do you think I'm bitter?" He laughs coldly. "No. I'm grateful. You gave me another reason to be disappointed in you."

"Wretched spawn," Nut mutters.

"Yours, by the way," Nattawat winks, flicking the desk pendulum and setting it into a steady ticking rhythm. "Now back to my question. I know you were paid to bury that case. By whom?"

“Which case are you talking about?”

“The Titicharoenrak family murders. You remember — big scandal. Double homicide. Gunshots. Fatal injuries.”

“That rings a bell,” Nut muses, watching him closely.

“I need the name of the person who ordered it.”

“You’re joking. How would I know that?”

“At the very least, you know who wanted the case silenced.”

“You’re overestimating me.”

“I don’t believe you,” Nattawat scoffs. “Don’t lie to me, Dad. I can play dirty too.”

“You threatening me, brat?” Nut laughs.

Nattawat pulls several folded pages from his jacket and tosses them onto the desk. Nut lifts a brow and unfolds them. As his eyes race over the text, the smirk fades. Confusion flashes, followed by a flicker of fear, before his expression settles back into indifference.

“And what is this?”

“Your offshore accounts. The channels you use to launder bribes. At least three of your benefactors are criminals you conveniently acquitted. And the best part?” Nattawat smiles. “Large sums came in during active trials. You’re screwed.”

“These accounts have nothing to do with me. My name isn’t even there.”

“Oh? Then how did I find them on your computer?”

“You went through my files?”

“Not today. A long time ago. I had plenty of time to gather proof of your stellar judicial career. You can’t erase it now. It’s in your best interest to cooperate.”

“Blackmailing your own father?” Nut chuckles. “A bastard, just like me. Fine. What do you want?”

“The name.”

“I don’t know it.”

“Then let’s try another angle. Who is Hwang? You know him, don’t you? You’ve got one foot in the criminal world.”

Nut looks up, surprised, a faint twitch of his brow betraying him. He falls silent, clearly deep in thought. After a long pause, he laughs softly, as if amused by some private realization.

“And you truly know nothing about him, do you?”

Nattawat bites the inside of his cheek, drilling him with a heavy stare. Now he’s certain — the man knows exactly who that bastard is. But the chances of him ever admitting it, let alone naming the person, are close to zero. It’s absurd, really. Nut is probably just as terrified of him as everyone else.

“He did have a direct influence on this whole thing. Is that what you wanted to know? Then yes, you’re right. Hwang is the most dangerous and powerful man in this city. I’m honestly surprised you even know his name. That level of crime isn’t yours. What do you want from me? For me to tell you who he is? No. I won’t set him up, especially not for your whim. Want to know where his office is? I won’t tell you that either — for your own safety.”

“How do I find him?”

Nut studies him coolly. “May I ask, Nattawat, why you’re digging into this? What do you gain from it? It’s extremely dangerous.”

“I have my reasons. The people you’re covering for killed innocent people. They left two children orphaned — for what? No one even knows. I want the truth.”

His father stares at him for a long moment, silent, predatory, as if searching his eyes for answers.

Passive aggression has always been Nattawat’s way of dealing with him. He never starts open conflict, but constantly expresses his resentment in subtle ways. Years of pain and bitterness from a brutal childhood push him to force guilt onto the man who had been a terrible father. The problem is, the man feels none. Conscience simply doesn’t exist in him.

“Is it Norawit Titicharoenrak or North Titicharoenrak who interests you?” Nut asks bluntly.

“What?” Nattawat blurts out, stunned.

“I remember the victims had two children. They’re a bit older than you, so it’s only logical to assume you’re in contact with them. And with one of them — very closely. So which one is more your type?”

“That’s none of your business. It doesn’t matter which of them I’m helping. What matters is that two people were murdered, and you let their killers walk free.”

“If their children don’t stop, they’ll be next. This is not something you should get involved in. You’re not five years old — you should understand that,” he snaps coldly.

“The guilty ones weren’t punished because of you. You sold them a ticket to freedom.”

“And you’re the hero helping to uncover them?” Nut sneers.

“Yes. I’m fixing what you ruined. Someone in this world has to fight for justice.”

“Interesting. And how far are you willing to go?”

“Far enough to threaten you.”

His father lets out a venomous laugh and exhales deeply.

“That’s not a threat, you little shit. You have no idea what real threats look like. I’ve faced truly dangerous ones my entire life.”

“Too bad none of them finished the job.”

“The feeling is mutual. I should’ve forced your mother to get an abortion.”

“It’s a little late for that after all these years. Who paid you to stay silent?”

“You have no idea what you’re getting into. Calm down while you still can.”

“I know it’s Influence. Tell me — who exactly is Hwang there?”

“The founder.”

“And he’s still running everything?”

“Yes.”

“How do I reach him?”

“He’ll find you himself. There’s no other way.”

“Is he really that untouchable?” Nattawat murmurs, more to himself than to him.

“You understand what will happen to you if he finds out you’re digging into him, right? Nothing will stop him.”

“And you don’t care?” Nattawat scoffs, throwing him a distrustful glance.

“If you’re so bold, go knock on his office door and ask him yourself. Let’s see how long you live. There’s a reason every lead in this investigation disappears without a trace.”

“Someone had to negotiate this with you. Who? Him personally? What does he look like? Answer me — why is he hiding the truth so desperately?”

“You’re looking in the wrong place, idiot,” Nut laughs. “Ask your little friend about the reasons. It was his pathetic father who crossed a crime lord. If he hadn’t stuck his nose where it didn’t belong, he’d still be alive.”

“You won’t tell me anything else,” Nattawat concludes with a bitter sigh.

“You came here for nothing.”

“If you won’t play nice, we’ll do this the hard way. I’ll destroy you. I’ll tear your flawless reputation to shreds, and it won’t cost me a thing. I know you’re hiding more,” he snarls.

“You really think you can hurt me? I could shut you up before you even step outside this house. The only thing stopping me is that I don’t want the hassle. You’re just a boy — and not a particularly smart one. I thought you had at least a little brain, Nattawat, but today you disappointed me even more.” He slowly shakes his head. “Getting involved with the Titicharoenraks? What were you thinking? They’ve got a filthy reputation. Alcoholics and junkies. One never leaves the police station, and the other wipes his ass for him. I bet you spread your legs for the older one — thugs like you always had a thing for degenerates like him.”

Nattawat clenches his jaw and closes his eyes for a second. Three. Two. One.

Explosion.

He barely realizes when he swings and punches his father square in the face. He’d deserved it for a long time. The man grabs his nose, groaning in pain, cursing as his face flushes red with rage. He definitely won’t let this go.

Good.

Nattawat waits for him to stop whining like a child, then seizes him by the collar. He doesn’t feel the slightest regret. The man deserves every bit of it. Who does he think he is, insulting people he knows nothing about? He can humiliate Nattawat himself, or Night, or anyone else — but not Norawit. Never Norawit. That boy is the most precious thing in his life.

“Open your mouth about him one more time and I’ll rip your head off with my bare hands, understand?” Nattawat snarls, burning him with fury. “Last time I ask — how do I reach Hwang?”

“So I was right,” Nut smirks, narrowing his eyes. “Norawit Titicharoenrak. That’s your weakness. You have no idea how much you’ll regret this. They’ll destroy you both. Though, you know, he’ll probably do it faster than his enemies. Loving him will shatter your heart — mark my words.”

He bursts into loud, manic laughter, and in that instant Nattawat realizes why he’s so amused. He knows far more than he’s saying. He understands exactly what’s happening — while Nattawat understands nothing at all.

He shoves him away, and the man collapses back into his chair, still laughing.

There’s nothing more to learn here. Even at gunpoint, this bought-and-paid-for piece of trash wouldn’t reveal anything valuable. He’s just as afraid of them as everyone else.

Nattawat shakes his head and heads for the door, crushed. His only chance to help Norawit is slipping through his fingers, dissolving into thin air. He’s already planning his next move, searching for any remaining leads, when his father’s next words freeze him in place.

“I hope he prepared well. His qualifier starts right now.”

“What?” Nattawat asks, slowly turning.

“Oh, I mean Powerslide. Quite the spectacle tonight,” he smirks, clicking his mouse, eyes glued to the computer screen.

“How do you know about that?”

“I told you — one foot in the criminal world. I bought a ticket,” he shrugs. “I’ve got powerful, wealthy friends. They told me about this little show. I got curious — wanted to see what it was and why it brings in so much money. And imagine my surprise when I was let in on all its secrets.”

“What the hell are you talking about? What secrets?”

“Ah, right. The participants aren’t told in advance. You see, Nattawat, this isn’t just a race. It’s a survival run.” He turns the monitor toward him. “And since your friend isn’t exactly the best driver… pray he makes it out alive.”

Nattawat stares at the screen, watching footage that looks like surveillance from an underground garage. People move between rows of lined-up cars, inspecting them as if during a technical check. Some merely assess, but others—

Shit.

Right before his eyes, one of them slices through a brake line.

What the hell?

The realization slams into him, and panic explodes through his body. Holy shit. So that’s what this race really is. That’s their sick game. They send them all out knowing some of the cars are sabotaged — maybe all of them.

And Norawit has no idea.

His heart starts hammering wildly, blood roaring in his ears. Fear blinds him as he stares at the screen, forcing out the words:

“Where is it?”

“800 North Alameda,” Nut replies with a vile grin. “You’ve got ten minutes before the start.”

Ten minutes.

Only ten damn minutes remain before the start of the *Powerslide* qualifying race — a race that could become the first and last of Titicharoenrak's life — when Nattawat bursts out of his father's house at full speed. He vaults over a low hedge right in front of those pathetic hypocrites dressed in luxury brands, then spends another sixty seconds sprinting across the parking lot and diving into his car.

The sharp screech of tires and the roar of the engine make several guests turn in surprise, but within moments he disappears around the corner, leaving them behind in confusion. Nattawat tries again and again to call Norawit, desperate to warn him in time, but of course, there's no answer. The Mustang fills with long, agonizing beeps as he clings to the hope of hearing that familiar voice on the other end — but it's useless. He won't pick up.

Seven minutes.

Every second shaves more time away, and he still has a long drive ahead. He won't make it before the race begins unless he finds a way to cut the route. Somewhere deep inside, a tiny spark of hope still glows — that maybe he can change something.

The start is marked on Melrose Avenue, and logically, that means the race itself will stay within a relatively small radius. This isn't an endurance run. But the western part of the city is a maze of winding streets, and that's bad. Very bad.

The only comfort is that he hadn't wasted those training hours — he taught Norawit how to drift properly. But if the car has no brakes, he'll crash on the very first turn. Nattawat needs the full route to reach him in time, and the only way is to find a shortcut. From what he'd seen on his father's computer, spectators who bought tickets had access to the mapped-out track. Which means he needs one thing — a spectator pass.

He quickly dials Pahn, recently discharged from the hospital, and draws in a deep breath. He knows Phu won't be happy that someone is bothering her while she's still weak, but there's no other choice. She's the only person who can help him. It's cruel to drag her into this when she hasn't even fully recovered, but right now, he's out of options. And Norawit is her best friend — she'll do anything for him.

"Hey, Natt," Pahn greets warmly after a few rings.

"I need your help. Urgently. I've got less than five minutes," he blurts out, skipping any preamble.

"God, what happened?"

"That fucking race," Nattawat snaps, slamming the gear shift forward. "No time to explain. I need you to buy a *Powerslide* ticket right now."

"Nattawat, but that ticket costs—"

"I don't give a damn how much it costs! I need it now. I'll pay you back later."

“It’s not that simple. You can’t just buy it. You need special clearance. Only rich people and —”

“Then get Night involved! Let him access it or ask his friends! Do something! Norawit could die!”

“What?!” she gasps, falling silent for a few seconds as she processes it. “Okay. Don’t panic. What’s going on?”

“He’s racing right now, and someone may have sabotaged his brakes.”

“What the hell?!” she yells.

“What the fuck?!” Phu’s furious voice echoes in the background.

“I’ll explain later. Just get the damn ticket.”

Five minutes.

Nattawat drives like a madman through the streets of Los Angeles, breaking every traffic rule, weaving sharply between the few cars still on the road this late. He doesn’t care about the angry horns or the near-misses. The only thing that matters is the race — the one where Norawit might die.

At least it’s late evening. The streets are mostly empty, reducing the risk of crashing into innocent drivers.

He glances at the clock, almost hearing the seconds burn away. Shit. He’s not going to make it. Time is slipping through his fingers. By now, Norawit is probably already sitting in the car, waiting for the signal. And Nattawat has no idea what will happen once the race begins.

Neither do the others.

They all dream of victory and the promised reward. Instead, they might receive death.

Nattawat remembers his own attempt — the adrenaline, the danger. It was risky, but nothing like this. He never even made it past the preliminary stage of *Powerslide*. Norawit was invited straight into the qualifiers, while Nattawat had only driven a demonstration run, crowded with racers where almost everyone crashed out. Even that stage was nearly impossible to pass.

There had always been accidents. People got hurt. Sometimes they died. But no one was surprised — it was racing. That’s how it went.

But now it was becoming clear: it had all been staged.

If that was true, then even the death of his and Night’s school friend hadn’t been an accident.

Shit.

This elite, untouchable race known as *Powerslide* was nothing more than a live survival show for rich bastards in Lim's circle. They watched in real time, placed bets, and treated human lives like a roulette wheel. And to make things even more thrilling, the organizers deliberately created deadly situations for the racers after the start.

They were completely insane.

And right now, Norawit Titicharoenrak was inside that madness.

He had agreed to this only for freedom — and had been cruelly deceived. He trained so hard, clung to hope, believed this race would save him. But even now, he wasn't fully prepared. His skills were good, but maybe not enough. His opponents would be monsters.

Nattawat had spent years sharpening his abilities. He had experience, techniques, instinct. Norawit never had that luxury. And Nattawat understood exactly what a race of this level meant: the best of the best gathered in one place. Against them, his boy would struggle — especially in cars with sabotaged brakes.

Now the catch behind Damian's generous offer became clear.

This wasn't a race to win.

It was a race to survive.

Damian had been fattening him up for slaughter. He knew it would be spectacular, profitable — people would bet on Norawit because of his beautiful driving. He'd gifted him a car, allowed time to train, pretended to give him a choice, all just to use him in the end. He had watched as Norawit burned with hope, knowing full well that this race might become his death sentence.

"Done. I'm in the system," Pahn finally says.

"What do you see?" Nattawat demands.

"Live feed from the starting point. Norawit's already in the car. They're preparing. There are nine racers total. Their cars have trackers, so we can follow each of them."

"Is there a route?"

"Yes."

"Thank God. I need to know where he'll be. Can you guide me the fastest way to him?"

"I think so. Are you sure his brakes are broken?"

"I don't know whose cars are damaged. Maybe his isn't. But that doesn't make it safer. Someone else could lose control. Or crash into him on purpose. There are no rules here. I'm not leaving him alone in this."

"You're right. Give me a second — I'll map out the shortest route."

Nattawat nods automatically, forgetting she can't see him. His nerves are so frayed that he bites his lips until he tastes blood. He doesn't know how this will end. All he can do is keep driving toward West Hollywood.

He's terrified.

Not for himself. Not for the race.

For the first time in his life, he's truly afraid for someone else.

All he can think about is Norawit.

His safety. His survival.

Nattawat doesn't know that maybe the brakes are already gone — and if Norawit accelerates for a familiar maneuver, only to realize he can't slow down, it will be over. At that speed, there will be nothing left of him.

A deafening alarm suddenly blasts from the speakers, like a hellish siren, sending violent chills down Nattawat's spine.

This is bad.

He doesn't need to ask what it means.

Nattawat throws a terrified glance at the clock and understands instantly.

Time is up.

"One minute. The race is about to begin. Sixty seconds to the start," Pahn says nervously.

Those simple words squeeze his heart into a painful knot. He has never been this afraid — not even in Osaka, when everything was on the line. Back then, he had been risking not only the car he'd put up as a bet, but his own life. And yet, even that was nothing compared to Powerslide. Even the shooting in Ojai couldn't match the sheer panic tearing through him now.

Of course, Nattawat no longer hopes to make it to the start in time — it's simply impossible. Still, somewhere deep inside, a tiny spark of hope remains that he won't be too far behind and might still catch up. All he can do is chase them, try to warn Titicharoenrak about the danger before something truly tragic happens. He has no idea how he's going to do that, so he decides to act on instinct. The only thing that matters is reaching him. Protecting him.

"Okay," Pahn takes a deep breath. "Since you're on Burton right now, turn right toward San Vincent Boulevard."

"Got it. What about traffic?" Nattawat asks, pressing harder on the gas and slicing flawlessly through another sharp turn, tires screaming.

“Clear. Everything’s already dispersed. But I’ll give you a green corridor at the lights just in case — though you’d probably run every red anyway.”

“Am I far from him?”

“No. But push it. You need Melrose Avenue. It’s blocked off right now, so be careful. Most likely for the race.”

“Can you see what’s happening there?” he asks, flooring the accelerator.

“They’re still counting down,” Phuwin answers, swearing under his breath. “Four… three… two… one. They’re off.”

“You’re almost there. Cut through here — left. You’ll come straight onto their track,” Pahn says.

Nattawat eases off for a split second, then snaps the wheel, diving into the turn before tearing down the street like a character straight out of Fast & Furious or a racing game. The roar of other engines is already close. Good. He’s almost there.

He shifts gears and accelerates again, finally spotting the race ahead. Normally, he’s gentle with his Mustang and rarely uses nitro, but right now he doesn’t care. He needs to reach Norawit — now. He slams the boost, and the car launches forward at an insane speed, devouring the empty road and rapidly closing the distance.

“Where is he?” Nattawat asks, stabilizing the car and matching their pace.

“He’s third. Someone’s right on his tail, practically breathing down his bumper,” Phuwin replies.

“Shit!” Nattawat snarls, blasting through another intersection.

“You need to pass at least six to line up right behind him.”

“He’ll handle it. Everything will be fine. Just be careful yourself — for now, things are under control,” Pahn says.

“How’s he driving? Any sign something’s wrong with the car?” Nattawat asks.

“No, looks fine. A little rough, but solid,” Cypher answers.

Nattawat edges closer to the outermost car and boldly goes for the overtake. It’s easy. Some of these guys are far weaker technically, and he can read their moves before they even make them. When he slips past two of the six, he notices everyone slowing to enter the first turn.

And in that moment, it becomes painfully clear who doesn’t have brakes.

The first four cars take the turn cleanly — Norawit among them — and Nattawat exhales in sharp relief. The weight crushing his chest finally lifts. So his brakes are fine. He pulled off the maneuver beautifully, cleaner than most of his rivals, and pride flares in Nattawat’s chest.

He lines up for the turn himself — and then the car directly ahead suddenly surges forward instead of slowing, swerving wildly across the road.

There it is — the damaged car he'd seen on the stream.

Maybe the two he passed are damaged too, because they're driving like lunatics at the back. The red Ferrari fishtails violently, the driver clearly losing control, before spinning and flipping at full speed.

Horror freezes Nattawat as he watches the mangled car bounce across the asphalt like a toy, weightless, before crashing to a stop upside down.

The driver is probably dead.

First victim of the year.

No one survives crashes like that. And the worst part? No one is really at fault. Just another street race. Another reckless racer dead. In Los Angeles, this doesn't even shock anyone.

Fucking hell.

"Holy shit," Phuwin's stunned voice crackles through the speakers.

"You saw that too?" Nattawat asks.

"Unfortunately. What the hell is this?"

"No rules except one — reach the finish. That's Powerslide."

"Careful, left!" Pahn shouts.

A silver Audi presses in from the side, trying to force him off the road. Nattawat exhales sharply, then slams the brakes. The rival miscalculates, skidding away as Nattawat guns it, surging back into the chase.

He slices through the turn and hits the boost again, rapidly closing the gap. They're so close now — he can already glimpse the rear bumper of Norawit's black car flashing between others.

One more to pass.

He shifts, surges forward, and aggressively goes for the opening.

He draws the black Maserati's attention to himself, giving Norawit the perfect opening to pull ahead. Titicharoenrak immediately breaks free, chasing the remaining rivals.

Norawit glances in the mirror, frowning.

What the hell is this?

"What are you doing here?" he mutters, slamming the gas.

He recognizes the Mustang instantly — the dragon on the hood, the red neon underglow. Even in the dark, he'd know that car anywhere. It taught him how to drive on the edge. He knows every centimeter of it.

It doesn't surprise him that Nattawat is racing — but why didn't he say anything?

Now his confidence crumbles with every growl of the Mustang behind him.

He can't beat him.

Then he realizes — Nattawat isn't chasing the finish. He's protecting him.

That only makes Norawit angrier.

He exhales sharply, eyes flicking back again and again as he closes in on the two leaders. He needs to pass them — then he'll deal with Nattawat. Even second place would be enough. Top three is all that matters. After that, they're going to have a very serious conversation.

Meanwhile, Nattawat is battling the Maserati that refuses to let go.

He swerves. It follows.

He accelerates. It stays glued.

The driver is good — confident, aggressive.

Then Nattawat sees it.

Two cars closing in on Norawit from both sides.

They're boxing him in.

Fuck.

They're teaming up to take him out.

That's it.

If they're playing this dirty, he'll clear the road all the way to the finish for Norawit.

This race ends with Titicharoenrak winning.

"Nope. You picked the wrong target, boys. Touch my man and I'll end you."

"Turn coming up," Pahn warns. "After that — the final straight."

"Perfect. That's all I need."

He prepares, heart hammering, calculating every second. His hand tightens around the handbrake.

A short tap on the brakes.

A sharp yank.

The Mustang slides sideways in a perfect controlled drift, cutting directly in front of the Maserati. Thick white smoke blinds the rival, forcing him to fall back.

“One down,” Nattawat grins. “That’s how you do it.”

“Nattawat…” Phuwin says tensely.

“What?”

“Your name just appeared on the list.”

“What?” Nattawat laughs nervously. “How the hell is that possible? I didn’t even apply.”

“I don’t know. But you’re officially in the Powerslide qualifiers.”

“Are they insane?! I’m not here to race! Did you see what they’re doing?! First they tried to kill me, now Norawit!”

“It’s dirty driving, yeah. But there really are no rules. Wasn’t it always like this when you tried to get in before?”

“They didn’t try to murder me! I never even made it this far!” Nattawat snaps, watching as Norawit’s Porsche gets trapped again.

“They’re going to force him out. Careful.”

“You don’t even show on the map, but your name’s on the board,” Pahn says. “You’re fourth. People are betting on you.”

“Only fourth?” Nattawat smirks. “Guess I’ll fix that.”

“Natt, please be careful.”

“Fuck that. No rules? Then I’ll play dirty too.”

He accelerates hard, pulling alongside the orange sports car boxing Norawit in. Timing it perfectly, he bumps the rear bumper just enough, then backs off.

The rival swerves.

That hesitation is all Norawit needs.

He explodes forward, breaking free.

“Good job, baby,” Nattawat exhales, smiling. “Pahn, where’s the finish?”

“Underground parking, straight ahead.”

“Perfect.”

Norawit blasts through the barricade first.

A thunderous crack echoes — blue smoke erupts from the gate.

Winner.

The rest follow, Nattawat among them.

Inside, the broadcast cuts instantly.

On Pahn’s screen, the feed goes black.

No signal.

Seconds later, names begin to appear — the six racers who will advance to the first stage of Powerslide.

“Norawit Titicharoenrak,” Phuwin reads.

Three dots blink.

Waiting.

Holding breath.

Then:

“Nattawat Jirochtikul.” Pahn whispers, “Oh my God. What does that mean?”

“It means,” Phuwin says quietly, “they’re rivals now.”

Damian moved unhurriedly through the laboratory, half-listening to the steady stream of words coming from his ever-present assistant, Trevor, while scrolling through a report on his work tablet. He caught barely half of what the young man was saying; the rest dissolved beneath the dull echo of his own heels striking the marble floor. Still, the gist was clear enough: within the next two months, a major new contract with the U.S. Air Force awaited them.

But that was not what occupied his thoughts.

The qualifying round of Powerslide had ended a little over two hours ago. The participants had been delivered safely to his facility, and the necessary procedures for their continued

involvement were already underway. Damian was heading toward the medical wing, where they were gradually regaining consciousness.

He had not been able to watch the race live; negotiations with the Iranians had demanded his full attention. Later, he would review the recording himself, evaluate the cinematography, assess the racers' performance. It was always useful to observe one's own work from a distance. Weaknesses revealed themselves more honestly that way. Judging by Hwang's delighted tone earlier, however, the event had been a resounding success. The clients were satisfied.

"Mr. Lim?" Trevor prompted.

"What?" Damian glanced up, faintly irritated.

"I was asking whether you'd like to see them personally, or if I should brief them on what comes next."

"I'll take a look first," Damian replied as he approached a secured electronic door.

He tapped the badge hanging from his neck against the scanner. A green light blinked to life. After entering his access code, the heavy doors slid apart with a soft hiss. They walked down the long corridor and stepped into a busy room filled with staff.

The atmosphere tightened immediately at the sight of their formidable boss. Polite nods followed him like a ripple. Damian ignored both them and the fear emanating from them, continuing onward into an adjacent chamber.

He stopped before a wide pane of glass, like the observation window in an FBI interrogation room, and gave a quiet, satisfied hum. The two-way mirror offered a clear view into the room beyond.

The young men lay on hospital beds, slowly waking from minor surgical procedures. The anesthesia had left them weak and vulnerable; they were being allowed to rest.

Damian studied each face carefully. Everything had gone exactly as planned. The same faces he had intended to see in the next stage of the game. The best of the best.

Except there were seven.

There should have been six.

His gaze found the extra one almost immediately. He blinked once. Twice. As if hoping the image would correct itself.

It did not.

All his attention narrowed on the dark-haired young man in a classic suit and black shirt, someone who had never been meant to participate. He lay curled on his side, knees drawn in slightly, like a sleeping child. He seemed physically unharmed, slowly surfacing from unconsciousness like the others.

It was him. Without question.

The small mole on his nose, just like his mother Esther's. The sharply shaved eyebrow.

Nattawat Jirochtikul.

And of course, he was here alongside Titicharoenrak.

This had never been part of the plan. Since the show's inception, Nattawat had always been strictly excluded from the participant lists. No matter how talented a racer he was, he was never to be involved.

What the hell was he doing here?

"Wait," Damian said, turning to Trevor, anger rising like heat beneath his skin. "What is he doing here? He wasn't on the list. Who approved this deviation?"

"Nattawat Jirochtikul?" Trevor clarified, checking the names.

"Yes, for God's sake, Nattawat Jirochtikul. What is he doing here?"

"He was added during the race itself."

"What?" Damian snapped, grabbing Trevor by the front of his shirt. "What do you mean added? We never do that. I never gave that order. Who authorized it?"

"Mr. Lim, we received direct instructions. He was at the race. The audience saw him and immediately began placing heavy bets. It couldn't be avoided."

"I don't care about the bets. He shouldn't be here. Release him. Now."

"I can't. We have orders. You're expected to comply as well."

"Who dared to give such an order?" Damian demanded, his icy gaze cutting through the room. "Who?"

"Mr. Hwang."

Damian froze.

His expression shifted instantly. His brows drew together, confusion flashing across his face. Why would the organizer interfere like this? Why involve the one person who had always been barred from even the qualifying rounds, despite his extraordinary skill?

Plans had changed without his knowledge.

He inhaled sharply through his nose, then slowly released his grip on Trevor's shirt, smoothing the wrinkled collar with deliberate calm. Blaming Trevor was pointless. He was just an obedient executor of higher commands.

"Hwang," Damian repeated evenly, though irritation bled into the word.

“Yes.”

“They’ve already implanted the device, haven’t they?” His eyes drifted back to Nattawat’s sleeping figure.

“Yes, sir. The operation’s been completed on all of them.”

“Damn it.” Damian dragged a hand through his hair and shut his eyes briefly.

“Is something wrong?”

“Everything is wrong. Now I can’t extract him. He’s trapped. Just like the rest.” He stepped closer to the glass, staring at Nattawat, regret flickering in his voice as it dropped to a whisper. “I can’t help him anymore.”

The door swung open abruptly.

Hwang himself entered, radiating satisfaction, already savoring the millions about to swell his accounts. He approached with an easy swagger and clapped Damian on the shoulder as though congratulating him.

“Excellent work. The race was spectacular.”

“Trevor, leave us,” Damian said quietly, shrugging off Hwang’s hand.

“Yes, sir.”

The assistant exited swiftly. The door clicked shut.

In the same instant, Damian shoved Hwang hard in the chest. The man stumbled back a step as Damian’s fury spilled over.

“What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?”

“What’s the problem?” Hwang asked mildly.

“You really don’t understand? Don’t pretend to be an idiot.” Damian pointed toward the glass. “You dragged Nattawat into this. Nattawat. Are you insane?”

“And?” Hwang smiled thinly. “Why should that concern you?”

“You have the nerve to ask that? He’ll be killed here.”

“You speak as if you care about him.” Hwang’s expression darkened. He seized Damian by the throat. “Did you lie to me? Did you let yourself get acquainted with him?”

“No,” Damian forced out, struggling for breath. “I just don’t understand why you did this. He could die. I thought you only wanted Titicharoenrak dead.”

“Nattawat’s a good racer. He’ll manage.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Damian whispered, gripping Hwang’s forearm in a futile attempt to loosen the hold.

“That’s none of your concern. Your job is to run the race. I’ll ask again. Do you know him? Answer honestly, and I might show mercy.”

“We crossed paths. At a casino.”

Hwang’s eyes filled with cold disappointment. He released Damian’s throat only to strike him sharply across the face.

“I warned you hundreds of times,” Hwang said, gripping his shoulder and pulling him close. “I told you not to go near him.” His fist drove into Damian’s solar plexus, knocking the air from his lungs before shoving him away.

Pain exploded through his chest. For several seconds, darkness crept into his vision. When he finally managed to breathe again, he straightened with effort.

“Yes,” he rasped.

“Then stay away from him,” Hwang replied coolly, adjusting his jacket. “Let’s not ruin our partnership. We have a long collaboration ahead.”

“Keep your hands off me, and we won’t,” Damian shot back. “Your threats don’t impress me.”

“Don’t play the hero. You’re not one. I know you’re afraid of me.”

“That boy shouldn’t be here,” Damian said, ignoring him. “I don’t care about him, but—”

“He came to the race of his own accord. He knew what he was stepping into. He made his choice.”

“You shouldn’t have allowed it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Once the heavy bets started rolling in, there was nothing to be done. He walked into the trap himself. What exactly are you accusing me of? Let him handle his own problems.”

“This could spiral into something much bigger for us.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Hwang said flatly. “His last name means nothing here.”

“If he dies, that will be on your conscience.”

“Are you worried about him? You’re nothing to him. Even if he learns the truth, it changes nothing.” Hwang gave a dry laugh.

“I don’t need him to know me. I just don’t understand what you’re doing.”

“A clash of lovers in a race to survive. Isn’t that entertaining?” Hwang laughed again.

“It’s disgusting. How can you, knowing that—”

“Enough!” Hwang barked, grabbing Damian by the jaw. “Handle what you’re permitted to handle and stay out of the rest. Don’t forget yourself, or I’ll remind you the unpleasant way. Understood?”

“Understood,” Damian said quietly, lowering his gaze.

Norawit is the first to open his eyes.

He presses his fingers to his temples, feeling as if his skull is splitting cleanly in two from some dull, incomprehensible pain inside. As though someone had struck him hard with something heavy. Slowly, he lifts a dazed gaze to the ceiling and stares at the soft white hospital lights for several long minutes, blinking calmly, trying to steady himself.

Carefully, he pushes himself up and sits on the edge of the bed, glancing around with growing unease.

The room looks like a hospital ward. White walls. White floor. So sterile that the polished marble beneath his shoes gives a faint squeak when he shifts his feet. There is nothing here except simple spring beds lined in rows. Nothing at all—except for a large mirror hanging on one wall.

A strange place.

Where the hell are they?

Norawit rubs his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, trying to remember what happened. He clearly recalls finishing the qualifying stage of “Powerslide,” pulling into the underground parking lot, stepping out of the car—

And then nothing.

The only thing he hasn’t forgotten is the sharp, crushing sensation at his neck, as if someone had clamped down on his carotid artery. Now that same spot throbs painfully with every movement.

He looks at the people lying motionless on the other beds and instinctively reaches up to touch his own neck. His fingers brush against a small adhesive bandage.

He frowns.

“What the hell is this?” he mutters to himself, shaking his head in confusion.

His eyes dart anxiously around the room until they land on a familiar face.

Nattawat.

Like the others, he’s lying there peacefully, as if simply asleep.

What the hell is going on?

Norawit forces himself to walk over on unsteady legs. He brushes a few strands of dark hair away from Nattawat’s face and gently strokes his cheek. No visible injuries. He seems intact.

“Baby,” Norawit calls softly. “Wake up, okay?”

No response.

He lightly pats Nattawat’s cheeks. Nattawat winces, then slowly stirs. He opens his eyes—only to squeeze them shut again against the harsh brightness.

“Norawit?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Come on. Sit up.”

Norawit helps him upright.

“What’s happening? Where are we?”

“No idea. But I don’t like this. We need to get out of here.” He hesitates, then frowns. “Why are you here, anyway? Were you in the race?”

“I was trying to save you.”

Norawit freezes. “What? What are you talking about?”

Nattawat sits up straighter, jaw tight. “I found out something about Powerslide. It’s not just a race. It’s insane. I saw a car with its brakes sabotaged. Maybe more than one. Someone tried to run me off the road. They were trying to kill you.”

Norawit stares ahead, the realization settling like ice in his chest.

“So it’s not a race,” he murmurs quietly. “It’s survival.”

“Exactly.”

A pause.

“So you came because of me?”

“Yes.” Nattawat pulls him into a tight embrace. “I was terrified. I saw them trying to force you off the road. I’m sorry.”

“I thought you just wanted to compete,” Norawit says softly. “You love racing.”

“Idiot. I’d never compete against you. This race was supposed to be your way out. But now…” He shakes his head. “I don’t want you involved in this. Not anymore.”

He kisses him.

“Then I won’t be,” Norawit replies without hesitation. “Lim can go to hell. I’ll find the money some other way.”

“We will,” Nattawat corrects.

Norawit nods, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “We.”

His expression fades again. “The moment I stepped out of the car, I blacked out. My neck hurts like hell.”

“Wait,” Nattawat says sharply. “Yours too?”

Norawit turns his head aside. Nattawat carefully peels off the bandage despite his protest.

There’s a small, fresh incision at the back of his neck, just below the hairline. No longer than three centimeters. Precisely cut. Neatly stitched.

Nattawat’s stomach drops.

Norawit walks to one of the other unconscious racers and removes his bandage as well.

The same incision.

Identical.

“And him too,” Norawit says quietly. “Looks like all of us.”

“What are you talking about?” Nattawat asks.

“They did something to us while we were out. We all have the same cut on our necks.”

Around them, the others begin waking up one by one, equally disoriented and afraid.

Seven of the nine racers who crossed the finish line are here. One definitely died in the crash. The other is unaccounted for.

No one looks like they knew what they were signing up for.

They were lured here.

All of them.

The door suddenly swings open.

Every head jerks toward the sound.

A man steps inside—mid-twenties, impeccably dressed, carrying himself with chilling arrogance. He scrolls lazily through something on a tablet, barely sparing them a glance.

Pure, effortless cruelty in human form.

“Everyone awake?” he asks coolly without looking up.

“Yes, sir,” his assistant replies from behind him.

“Good. Then let’s begin.”

He lifts his eyes at last. Bright. Cold. Graveyard cold.

His gaze lingers on Nattawat longer than the others before moving on.

“Well,” he says with a satisfied smile that creates dimples in his cheeks, “the seven best racers, all in one place. Impressive.”

“Who the hell are you?” one of the racers—Max—demands. “Where are we?”

“For some of you, no introduction is necessary. But for the rest—my name is Damian Lim. I selected each of you personally.”

“You selected us?”

“Yes. I’ve been compiling this list for quite some time.” His eyes flick briefly to Nattawat. “Some surprises, of course. But if you’re here, it means someone placed a bet on you. And that means you’re in the game.”

Silence thickens the air.

“This race has three rules,” Lim continues calmly. “First: there are no driving rules. Second: reach the finish line. Third: survive.”

“That’s insane!” Max snaps, stepping forward. “Let us go! I never agreed to this!”

Lim doesn’t even flinch. His assistant raises a gun in one smooth motion, pressing it to Max’s head.

The click of the safety being released echoes loudly.

“If I were you,” Lim says mildly, “I would behave. You have questions. I have answers. So close your mouth and stand still—or this conversation will end permanently.”

Max hesitates… then slowly steps back.

“Excellent,” Lim smiles. “Now. Most of you owe me money. And you know what happens when I’m displeased. But for those who think they can simply walk away…”

He tilts his head slightly.

“You’re all feeling pain in your necks, aren’t you?”

A chill runs through the room.

“While you were unconscious, my specialists implanted a device. It allows me to control you. Influence you. Your actions. Your memories. Your lives.”

Norawit’s blood runs cold.

Blast.

The device he delivered for Lim.

“You’re lying,” Max laughs nervously. “This is some sci-fi bullshit.”

“You’re tiresome,” Lim says softly, tapping his tablet.

Max collapses instantly.

His body convulses violently on the floor. He screams. Veins bulge in his neck. His face turns blue as he claws at his throat, choking—

Then he goes still.

Silence.

“Is he… dead?” someone whispers.

Lim steps forward, nudges the body with the tip of his polished shoe, and sighs.

“Yes. He’s dead. Now there are six of you. Even better.”

Horror floods the room.

“There’s a small capsule inside the device,” Lim explains casually. “When activated, it releases VX into your bloodstream.”

“What does that mean?” Nattawat demands, voice shaking.

“It means,” Lim says, gesturing to the corpse being dragged away, “you are carrying a military-grade nerve agent inside your body.”

The words hang heavy.

“Anyone else want to test me?” he asks calmly.

No one moves.

“Good. Now. The stages. First: paired race. One wins, both win. Second: solo. Top three advance. Third: the final race, on a track built exclusively for Powerslide in a secret location. The winner gets everything—money, cars, fame.”

“And the losers?” someone whispers.

“They’re eliminated. Permanently.”

Norawit stares at him. “So all of it was planned? The debt, everything?”

“Not everything,” Lim replies. “Your brother truly owes me. But the race… that idea came later. I knew you’d do anything for him.”

“You’re disgusting,” Nattawat says.

“I’ve heard worse.”

Lim turns toward the door.

“You’re free—for now. Keep your cars and phones ready. The next race’s time and location will be sent one hour before it begins. Miss it—and you die. Or perhaps I’ll experiment with your memories. Depends on my mood.”

He gives Nattawat one last lingering look. Then Norawit.

And leaves.

At the same moment, every phone in the room vibrates.

A single message. From a hidden number.

Norawit exhales shakily and opens it.

«Welcome to Powerslide. The last race of your life has just begun.»

Large drops drummed against the gray granite headstone, against the name that still sent a violent tremor through him: Pond Naravit.

The years of his life were carved just beneath in a delicate script, and those dates cut like a knife to the heart. The distance between his birth and his death was heartbreakingly small. Twenty five years. That was all he had been given. It was monstrously unfair.

The earth on the grave was still level, not yet fully settled. Fresh flowers lay scattered at the base of the stone. A month had passed since the funeral, yet they were always new. His

friends never let them wilt; every day someone brought more. Today it was Norawit's turn.

To say it was hard to come here would be an understatement. Every time he looked at the gray slab, his heart felt as though it were bleeding out inside his chest. The gloomy weather seemed to echo the state of his torn soul. The sky was swallowed by heavy clouds, and a steady rain had been falling since morning, as if it understood his mood.

He crouched down and rested his palm against the cool curve of the stone. His fingers traced the letters of the familiar name on their own, and something inside him twisted painfully.

"I'm sorry, Lil Thee," Titicharoenrak whispered, closing his eyes as he remembered that bright, crooked smile. "If only you knew how much we all miss you, old man."

Strangers passed by—other grieving people burying someone they loved—while he remained seated beside his friend's grave, still unable to believe Pond was gone. He barely remembered the day they said goodbye; everything was wrapped in fog. The boys from The Loop and Pond's family had merged into one broken unit. Everyone cried. No one hid it. Alone, it was unbearable. Together, it was somehow survivable.

Nothing, however, was heavier than burying your parents at eleven years old.

His own family lay in this same cemetery. His parents' graves stood at the far end beneath a large tree. Norawit always brought fresh peonies—his mother's favorite. But he could never stay long. It still hurt too much. And now the pain was sharpened by a fresh wound.

Because he knew one terrible truth: the same person was responsible for his parents' deaths —and for Pond's. And that person was still free.

"I'll find him," Norawit murmured, pulling up his rain-soaked hood. "I swear he'll pay for everything. I won't rest until I destroy him."

The rain suddenly stopped striking his hands and hoodie. Instead, he heard it pattering softly above him, against something solid. He lifted his head slowly.

A woman stood beside him, holding a large cane umbrella that shielded them both. She wore an elegant black midi dress, low-heeled pumps, and lace gloves to match. Her chestnut hair, touched lightly with gray at the temples, was gathered into a low bun tied with a mourning ribbon. There was grace in the way she carried herself—something refined and gentle that left him momentarily speechless.

Her face felt familiar.

"You're Norawit, aren't you? It's you?" she asked.

"Do we know each other?" he replied, surprised.

"Oh," she sighed warmly, smiling. "Then it is you. I always feared one day I wouldn't be able to tell you and your brother apart. But you—your eyes always held a particular kindness. Don't you recognize me?"

“I’m sorry,” he said, straightening awkwardly.

“Miss Monroe. Lorette Monroe.”

He blinked, studying her features. Of course. He remembered now. Time had changed her—etched grief into the lines of her face—but he remembered. The last time they’d seen each other, he’d been eleven. He’d grown. So had she.

What an unexpected meeting.

She had lived next door once, a friend of his mother’s. A schoolteacher. She’d been kind to him and to North. She’d stayed with them when their mother worked late shifts at the clinic. She brought apple pie with cinnamon and fresh muffins. After their parents died, she’d even tried to take them in. For reasons never fully explained, she’d been denied guardianship despite fighting for it. Soon after, the boys were transferred to an orphanage across the city. They hadn’t seen her since.

“You remember, don’t you?” Lorette asked, noticing the flicker of childlike joy in his eyes.

“It’s really you.”

“Hello, my boy. My God, how many years has it been?” She embraced him gently.

Norawit wrapped his arms around her slender waist and inhaled. She smelled exactly the same—apple pie, expensive French perfume, something faintly powdery. It felt surreal to run into a soft piece of his past.

She patted his shoulders and stepped back with polite delicacy. He took the umbrella from her so they could both stand more comfortably beneath it.

“Pond Naravit,” she read quietly from the stone. “Such a young man. A whole life ahead of him. Who was he to you?”

“A close friend. He was murdered,” Norawit said, the word heavy in his mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, squeezing his shoulder. “I recently lost someone dear to me as well.”

“You introduced yourself as Miss, not Mrs. For the first time,” Norawit noted carefully. “Your husband?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry. Mr. Monroe was a wonderful man.”

“He was,” she replied, dabbing at the corner of her eyes with a handkerchief. “But people die every day, my dear. It’s the cycle we all must pass through. I only wish Eddie hadn’t left me so soon. The Lord has plans for us all.”

She paused. “You visit your parents, I hope? They would want that.”

“Not as often as I should. But I try.”

“It’s difficult. I understand. I sometimes bring flowers to your mother myself. I thought of you and North often. How is your brother?”

“It’s complicated,” Norawit said quietly. “He’s trying to move forward. But… he’s broken.”

“Poor boy,” she sighed. “Don’t leave him alone. You were always his anchor. The most wonderful older brother.” She smiled at his profile. “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring you home with me. I tried. I swear I did.”

“It’s alright. You did more than enough. You were like a grandmother who lived two houses away.”

She laughed softly. “I always told myself never to grow attached to students. They grow up and fly away. But you two were the exception. I thought I’d lost you forever. It’s good to see you again—even here.”

“I’m really glad to see you too,” he admitted.

“And dancing? You quit, didn’t you?” she asked, her tone briefly returning to that of a teacher.

He chuckled. “I tried. It wasn’t for me.”

“Such a pity. You had talent. Still dreaming of becoming a doctor?”

“I did. I have different plans now.”

They reached a small red Volkswagen Beetle parked near the gates.

“How is your life these days, sweetheart?” she asked, rummaging in her purse for her keys.

“It’s complicated,” he said with a crooked smile. “But I’m happy. I look for light where I can.”

“Young love and all its troubles?” she teased gently.

“You’re as perceptive as ever,” he replied, smiling. “Yes. I love, and I’m loved.”

“I’m glad you have someone special. You must visit me. Bring your love, too. I’d like to meet them.”

“I will. Do you still live in the same house?”

“Oh no,” she said lightly. “I moved. Just two steps away.”

He frowned slightly, watching as she removed her gloves.

“Wait… you mean—”

“Yes,” Lorette nodded. “I live in your house now. When it went up for sale, no one wanted it—for obvious reasons. My husband and I sold ours and bought yours. It’s larger. Cozier. And you know how I adored your mother’s veranda. I wanted to preserve the house. And her memory.”

“I’m glad it’s someone like you,” he said softly.

“That won’t trouble you, will it? We can meet elsewhere, if you prefer.”

“No,” he shook his head. “It’s alright. I can handle it.”

“Oh, wonderful,” she smiled brightly as she started the engine. “I wanted to give you something.”

“Give me?”

“We renovated completely. We threw much away—but I kept some of your family’s things. Photo albums, documents, books. I didn’t know what to do with them. It felt right that the children decide. I kept only a few keepsakes for myself. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You’re incredible, Miss Monroe,” Norawit said, resting his hand on the car roof. “You have no idea how much that might help me.”

“For you, I’m just Lori,” she winked.

The red Beetle rolled slowly down the empty road. Only minutes later did Norawit realize he still held her umbrella.

He stood there long after the car disappeared, mind racing.

For the first time in years, he might finally have a lead in the dark mystery surrounding his family. There could be something among his father’s things—documents, records, evidence carefully hidden away. Something about that name he couldn’t stop thinking about.

Hwang.

He was certain he had seen it somewhere before.

And if he was right, he might finally learn why his parents were killed.

Chapter 13: XIII

Chapter Notes

> so..the secret is revealed now.. did you suspect it? was I very obvious? please let me know your thoughts in the comments 🤍
>
> — dana

“The stitches are very clean,” Pahn says, studying the small incision that runs a few centimeters down her best friend’s neck. “It looks like the skin was carefully cut with a scalpel and then just as carefully sealed back up. It’ll heal fast, but it’s going to hurt for a while. Can you feel them inside?”

“No,” Norawit answers without lifting his head.

“Me neither,” Nattawat says from across the room.

“What the hell even is this?” Phuwin mutters, turning the medical scans over in his hands.

They’d had them done at the hospital immediately, trying to understand what they were dealing with. The image shows part of Titicharoenrak’s neck. Among the murky shadows, there’s a pale white shape with thin branching lines that seem to have grown into the surrounding tissue. Beneath their skin, tangled among vital arteries and veins, sits a foreign object of completely unknown origin and purpose.

It’s terrifying. At any moment this tiny time bomb could go off. And right now, they’re trying to figure out if there’s any way to remove it without killing the person carrying it.

Everyone is there except North. Norawit still has to tell them the truth about why Pond died. They agreed to meet at Pahn’s apartment—and agreed not to say a word to his younger brother.

“I have no idea,” Nattawat says, cracking his knuckles, “but we need to get this thing out. It killed someone right in front of us while Lim was tapping on his tablet. I’m not going to be next.”

“Radio control,” Pahn says calmly, smoothing a bandage over Norawit’s neck. “That means they’re operated remotely. Systems like that are usually installed in large technical facilities. Commands and feedback travel through a specific channel via radio waves. Typically, there’s

a single operator issuing the commands. In our case—that's Damian. He's controlling all of you."

She presses the adhesive down with her slender fingers.

"He most likely has detailed data on each 'unit'—your physical condition, location, movement patterns. In short, he now knows absolutely everything about you. Down to how many times a day you go to the bathroom."

"So that's how he controls the participants," Titicharoenrak mutters darkly.

"Don't call us 'units.' That sounds disgusting," Nattawat grimaces.

"Sorry, Dragon. I'm speaking technically. To Lim, these things make you technical objects."

She finishes taping his wound.

"And this thing can really control our consciousness? Our memories?" Nattawat asks.

"In theory, yes. If it interfaces with the brain. It sounds like science fiction, but it's possible. And considering Damian is a genuine genius, it wouldn't surprise me."

"I don't think anything surprises me anymore," Norawit sighs.

"This is all fascinating," Satang says anxiously, "but what the hell is it physically? What does it even look like? How do you implant something that can kill at any moment? How is it anchored in there? This is insane."

Pahn takes Norawit's scan and studies it under the light like a seasoned doctor. Everyone waits in tense silence. She's the only one whose mind can even attempt to compete with Damian's.

Norawit has a rough idea. He's seen something similar before. But this looks like a modified version—slightly larger than the one he once carried out of a warehouse. The earlier model hadn't mentioned poison. Or maybe that clever bastard had simply left that part out.

"The transmitter itself is small," Pahn explains, tracing a nail along the image. "About two centimeters long. Most of the casing is likely a capsule filled with toxin. When the operator sends the activation signal, the capsule ruptures and releases the substance directly into the bloodstream."

She taps the thin white branches.

"These are wires. They wrap around the artery and anchor the device in place."

"Holy shit," Phuwin breathes.

"Removing it would be… difficult, right?" Satang asks quietly. "But you could do it?"

"I don't think so."

“Extraction would kill the host,” Norawit says softly, staring at the floor, biting his lip.

Everyone looks at him. Silence falls—heavy and suffocating.

He’s right. There’s no point offering false hope. There probably isn’t any. You don’t outsmart someone like Lim. He’s always one step ahead. He planned for this too. Installed them while they were unconscious.

And the creator had told him that night: it cannot be removed.

These devices were designed for terrorists—to recruit, control, command. They can alter memory. Issue orders. Silence dissent. If someone resists or tries to escape, they can rewrite them—or kill them.

Damian had conveniently left out who exactly buys these things.

Turns out, they’re also being used for something even more deranged: experimenting on ordinary people. Playing with human lives for profit in a race.

The world is insane.

“Yes,” Pahn nods slowly. “Neck surgery requires extreme precision. One wrong move, one damaged vessel, and the host dies instantly—or suffers catastrophic consequences.”

“It’s his damn invention,” Titicharoenrak mutters, running a hand through his hair. “He made me steal one on my first mission. He called it ‘Blast.’ It has a self-defense system.”

“Exactly,” Pahn agrees. “If we try to remove it without disabling it first, the wires will tighten further around the artery.”

“Why even create something like that?” Nattawat asks, baffled. “He develops weapons—but this?”

“In a way, it is a weapon,” she replies. “And it’s obvious who wants them. Terrorists. They’d pay well.”

“And why? To simulate neural influence. To manipulate brain activity. With that little thing, Damian can do anything to you now.”

“Yeah,” Norawit says bitterly. “We noticed that during the race.”

“We’re completely screwed,” Nattawat concludes.

He’s never been more right.

They all know it.

There’s no escape plan. No strategy. No miracle solution. For the first time in their lives, they have no idea how to get out of this.

And the worst part?

Now Nattawat is trapped in it too.

He put himself there trying to protect Norawit. Now he has no choice but to compete like the rest of them. Everything depends on how well he performs in the next race.

He once dreamed of entering “Powerslide.”

But not like this.

Not after learning what it truly is.

The police won’t help. Even their father was involved—placing bets. The system is rotten from every side. The authorities pretend not to see what’s happening in their city.

No one is coming to save them.

They will have to save themselves.

And they have to figure something out—before one of them ends up dead.

Everyone was shaken to the core, terrified and disoriented. No one understood what to do next or what the next minute might bring. It all felt unreal—like they had been dropped into the script of some twisted horror movie, something like Saw, where they were forced to play a deranged game of life and death. Reality itself seemed fragile, as if it might crack under the weight of what was happening.

By now, it was painfully clear that North’s debt had never truly mattered. It had simply been a pretext—an excuse for Lim to use them all for his own purposes. He had dragged in Titicharoenrak’s older brother, knowing how fiercely he loved the youngest. Then Nattawat had stepped into the game, racing in to save him. What Norawit couldn’t understand was why he had become the scapegoat in all of this. Why had Damian chosen to profit specifically from his driving skills? Nattawat had always been the more obvious choice—he was the professional. If someone wanted to exploit talent, it would have made far more sense to lure him in. Something about this didn’t add up. It felt personal. But aside from the debt, Norawit had never had any direct conflict with that man.

While everyone was in shock, Night was in absolute horror. His heart refused to settle. He understood the scale of the disaster, yet had no idea how to protect the people he loved from it. When the others had hurriedly told him about the race, he had fallen into a stunned silence and still hadn’t fully recovered. Nattawat’s involvement didn’t surprise him much—recklessness had always been one of his defining traits. He had a habit of acting on emotion without thinking, and this was exactly that: throwing himself into the fire because he loved someone too much to stand aside. And Night understood that. His brother had been trying to protect what mattered most to him. He couldn’t have known that he himself would be added to the list of racers in “Powerslide.” No one could blame him for how deeply he’d gotten entangled. And even if he had known, he wouldn’t have backed down.

What shocked Night most was their own father's silent complicity. He had known about this madness happening in their city and done nothing to shut it down. Worse—he was a spectator. A man placing bets. You couldn't gain access without paying a massive entry fee and wagering enormous sums during the race. That meant he had spent heavily and likely used influential connections to secure his seat.

Even they had needed a miniature heist of their own just to get Pahn access to the broadcast. Officially, she had been barred from purchasing a ticket, even though she was willing to pay. Nattawat had called in old favors, reaching out to one contact deeply rooted in the criminal underworld—a man whose clientele consisted of the worst kind of scum. Curtis Keeland had arranged access through the organizers' network within minutes. For those who operated in dirty businesses, doors opened with a snap of the fingers. He had bought the ticket under his own name. Nattawat didn't regret it, not even the money they'd been forced to pour into the required deposit. At least now they could watch what was happening and stay connected to that nightmare.

"And what exactly did you want to talk to us about?" Satang finally asked, studying Titicharoenrak carefully. "Why gather us without North?"

Norawit flinched. The question had been inevitable. He glanced helplessly at Nattawat, seeking that familiar silent support—and found it instantly. Nattawat moved without hesitation, sitting beside him and taking his hand. The gesture was simple but clear: whatever came next, he would stand by him.

Their friends' reactions were unpredictable. They had all suffered in that attack. They had all lost someone. None of them had healed yet. But Norawit couldn't keep this secret any longer. The longer he waited, the worse it would become. He had carried it alone for too long, chasing fragments of information about Hwang with no success. He needed them to understand.

"Baby Gem, don't scare us like that," Pahn said nervously. "Did something else happen?"

"No, I just…" He dragged a hand through his hair, forcing himself to continue. "Please don't tell North what I'm about to say. You'll understand why. But this concerns all of us."

"For God's sake, just say it," Night muttered.

Norawit inhaled sharply. "The attack in Ojai happened because of me. And it wasn't Lim."

Silence filled the room.

Then Phuwin laughed—a sharp, disbelieving sound. "What kind of nonsense is that? Because of you? How?"

"Before our trip, I did something," Norawit said quietly, shame burning under his skin. "I tried to find out the truth about my parents' deaths. That's why I didn't want to talk about it in front of my brother. Pond helped me get a gun. I confronted a man the police had tipped me off about—a former mercenary who worked for the organization that killed them. They

call themselves Influence. My father crossed them. That man was there the night my parents died. But he was just the executioner. I wanted the one who gave the order."

Pahn's face went pale. "The guy I searched for? You threatened him?"

Norawit nodded.

"You're insane," she breathed.

"He turned me in," Norawit continued. "Handed me over to the one who ordered my parents' deaths, probably to regain favor. The attack was punishment. A warning to shut me up. I doubt he even knew how many people would be there—or that someone would die. But it's still my fault. I should have known what could happen. I'm sorry."

Nattawat's grip tightened around his hand, steady and warm.

Phuwin's gaze burned like fire. Pond had meant everything to him—a mentor, almost a father. And now he was gone.

"Who did it?" Phuwin demanded. "Give me a name."

"His name is Hwang," Norawit answered. "That's all I've got. I'll find him. I'll make him pay."

"You've done enough!" Phuwin snapped. "Look at the result!"

"I know," Norawit shouted suddenly, standing up. "I know I'm to blame! Do you think I don't hate myself every day? I regret surviving. Is that what you want to hear? Hit me. Yell at me. I deserve it."

Phuwin lunged forward, but Nattawat stepped between them, shielding Norawit with his body.

"Don't," Nattawat said quietly. "If you hit him, you hit me."

Pahn wrapped her arms around Phuwin from behind. "We're family. Fighting won't bring anyone back."

"He doesn't even have a scratch," Phuwin spat bitterly.

"He's wounded more than any of us," Pahn whispered.

Norawit's voice broke. "He should be alive. Not me. Pond deserved a long, happy life. I didn't."

Tears filled Phuwin's eyes as the anger drained away. He saw the devastation in his friend's face—the guilt, the exhaustion, the self-loathing.

"Norawit…"

“Not now,” Norawit whispered.

He gently removed Nattawat’s hand from his arm and left the apartment, the door closing softly behind him.

It took courage to confess something like that, knowing the reaction might shatter what little stability remained. But hiding it any longer would have been worse.

Phuwin exhaled heavily, regret settling over him. He was hot-tempered, yes—but it came from loving too fiercely.

Nattawat watched him for a moment, then gave his injured shoulder a gentle squeeze before following Norawit out.

The message was clear to everyone in the room:

No matter how much he valued their friendship, Nattawat would always choose Norawit.

And if anyone stood against him—

He would stand beside him.

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The small kitchen in Titicharoenrak’s apartment was filled with the gentle melody from an old radio and the delicious aroma of sizzling oil, fried meat, and spices. Nattawat had been cooking dinner for both of them by habit, but tonight he was eating alone.

He picked at his food without much enthusiasm, the tines of his fork clinking softly against the glass plate. His thoughtful gaze drifted to the opposite side of the table, where an identical square plate of cooling dinner sat, a thin wisp of white steam rising from it. Time stretched so slowly. The chair remained empty, utensils untouched beside the plate, and the dinner completely uneaten. Norawit hadn't come home, though he had promised to arrive nearly an hour ago.

After their rather tense conversation with friends yesterday, he'd said he wanted to visit Phuwin and try talking again. They both should have calmed down by now, and he hoped this

time things would be better. Nattawat understood he needed to speak with his friend alone, after everything that had happened. Only Norawit himself could find the right words to make him understand and offer support, and Norawit desperately needed that. Being in conflict with loved ones during wartime was awful. They needed that personal space. But it was infuriating that he hadn't arrived on time as promised, especially since they always had dinner together.

Nattawat pressed the lock button on his phone again, checking for new calls or messages. Nothing. He wasn't responding, though Nattawat had already called him several times in the last twenty minutes. Phu was silent too, apparently they had both decided to forget about the world around them. He sighed heavily and continued eating the now cold dinner alone. He felt so strange now, accustomed as he was to Titicharoenrak spending practically every second of his free time with him, and for the first time in a long while, he felt lonely without him. That unpleasant feeling he had forgotten thanks to him returned.

It was so hard to depend on another person. And right now, Nattawat understood this more clearly than ever. He was genuinely dependent on Norawit, which is why he had no idea what they would do when they had to compete against each other in "Powerslide." For both of them, this was completely unacceptable. But there was no choice. If they were forced to do it, he couldn't even imagine what would happen. Knowing himself, he would probably just tell everyone to go to hell.

His solitude was interrupted by a small resident of the apartment who jumped onto the chair meant for his owner and sat obediently, gazing lovingly at the meat on the plate. Nattawat slowly shifted his eyes to him and couldn't help but smile. Brown pointed ears peeked over the edge of the table, hiding most of his small body. The cat twitched his tiny nose amusingly, sensing the delicious smell, and turned his head from side to side, but remained seated with good manners. He clearly understood that this delicious dinner was prepared by the person opposite him, as he was watching him, so he stared at him with huge eyes, trying to beg for something. His pupils became so large that he began to resemble that very cat from "Shrek" who could easily turn on the charm when needed.

"You're clever, aren't you?" Nattawat squinted at him. "You know how to play on pity, don't you?"

The cat responded with a quiet, plaintive meow, as if agreeing with him, then began to purr softly. Not at all like himself. Usually he was a real demon, but now he was the most charming creature in the world. And Nattawat understood why his boyfriend loved his "son"

so much. It was impossible to resist him. Jumu placed his white paws on the table, and Nattawat laughed quietly, putting another bite of food in his mouth.

"I understand why Norawit is so weak with you. You know how to manipulate. And even now you're ready to beg for food from someone who doesn't particularly like you, while making pretty eyes."

Suddenly, the phone on the table came to life, and Nattawat nearly jumped up, so desperate for any response, but it was just a message from Pahn. She wrote that the two idiots had been at a bar. The girl had sent Norawit home in a taxi, so he should be back soon. A huge weight of uncertainty fell from his shoulders, but a heaviness settled in his chest. He hadn't drunk in a long time, but it seemed he had slipped up. They must have had a very difficult conversation. But he had found comfort in alcohol again. It was hard to blame him for this; after everything that had happened, Nattawat would have gladly gotten drunk himself, but he didn't know how to relax that way. So all his efforts had failed. Titicharoenrak had been struggling with himself for weeks, and even his favorite beer, with which he used to end every difficult day before they met, had finally disappeared from his refrigerator. Now they would have to start all over again, but no one had ever said it was easy to fight one's weaknesses.

"Alright. It seems your daddy won't be having dinner with me tonight. Will you keep me company, Lord Jumu?" Nattawat asked, placing the device screen down. "You can eat. No one else will appreciate my efforts anyway."

Jumu looked at him suspiciously with his clever eyes for a long time, then hesitantly sniffed the meat on the plate. When no shouts or reproaches came from the man, he calmly dragged the pieces away one by one, emitting satisfied purrs.

"I hope we'll be friends after this?" Nattawat asked doubtfully, watching the cat drag the food away. "At least don't hate me so much. Whether you like it or not, I'm important to Norawit. I'll be here often, so get used to it, pal. I don't like you much, but I do kind of like you. You're sometimes cute when you're not behaving like a creature from hell."

Jumu ignored him, continuing to devour his dinner, and Nattawat smiled. Now that was more like him, the little egotist. This fluffy scoundrel meant a lot in Titicharoenrak’s life, so sooner or later he would have to befriend him anyway. So nasty, but completely charming when he wanted to be. Just like his owner.

His appetite quickly disappeared after learning that his boyfriend had been at a bar, so Nattawat threw away the rest of his food and put what the cat hadn't eaten into his bowl. He was about to turn on the water to wash the dishes, but his plans were interrupted by an insistent ringing that echoed throughout the apartment and didn't stop. The man frowned at the loud sound, opened the front door, and struggled to suppress a smile as he watched Norawit, forehead pressed against the wall, pressing the doorbell. He carefully removed his finger from the small button and crossed his arms over his chest, blocking the entrance to the apartment.

"Oh!" Titicharoenrak exclaimed loudly, lifting cheerful eyes to him, filled with a light haze. "Baby, I'm home."

"Yeah, I can see that. You're late for dinner," Nattawat replied, brazenly raising an eyebrow and looking him up and down.

He was wearing those same cursed leather pants that fit so tightly on his thighs that Nattawat sighed heavily as indecent thoughts suddenly struck his mind. And with his index finger, the man casually held the jacket hanging over his shoulder. His hair was swept back, and his plump lips seductively gleamed, so invitingly begging to be kissed. Damn, he was so beautiful.

"Sorry, I didn't notice how time flew by."

"No wonder. You're drunk."

"N-no," Norawit drawled and frowned. "I just had a little to drink. Damn, a couple of shots really hit me. I'm losing my touch," he laughed foolishly and patted his back pockets with his palms. "I lost my keys too, can you believe it? Good thing you're here at my place."

He took a step into the apartment threshold, but Nattawat placed his palm on his chest and gently pushed him back. He was slightly unsteady, as it was obvious he had drunk much more than "a little." Norawit was relaxed and cheerful under the influence of alcohol, which was moderate intoxication by Nattawat's standards. He looked so funny and cute, and was in a similar state when the man had last seen him drunk.

"A couple of shots, you say? Yeah, you really are losing your touch, Titicharoenrak," he smiled, tilting his head to the side.

"I'm really not drunk."

"No, not at all."

"I understand and control everything around me perfectly, I just need to lie down and rest a bit. So tired," Norawit said drawlingly and amusingly covered one eye, lifting his head upward. "Oh, the ceiling is spinning."

"Come on, touch your nose."

"What?" Titicharoenrak laughed.

"If you're too drunk, I won't let you in. I won't be able to sleep because of your hangover," Nattawat said sternly.

"Hey, but this is my home!" the man protested, amusingly furrowing his brows.

"Maybe you'll try to kick me out then? It seems you were the one who insisted I stay over more often. You're drunk and late for the dinner we agreed on. It's not your place to get smart right now, I'm angry."

"Really angry?"

"Yes. I cooked it for an hour and a half and waited another hour for you. So I have every right to tell you to fuckoff."

"Damn. You're especially sexy when you're being this insolent," Titicharoenrak said in a playful tone, running his fingers along his bicep. "Maybe we..."

"Don't even think about it," Nattawat warned, shaking his head negatively. "You're sleeping on Jumu's bed in the hallway."

Norawit laughed loudly and then moaned, trying to enter the apartment again. But Nattawat placed his hand on the doorframe, blocking his entrance.

"First, show me you're not too drunk."

"Come on, baby," he whined like a child, puffing out his lips.

"Come on, it'll only take two seconds," Nattawat insisted.

"What kind of strange role-playing games are you having, but I agree to everything now. Undress," Titicharoenrak said and touched his nose with his finger. "I want you right here and right now."

"Not mine, Norawit," the man laughed. "You're too drunk. Go sleep in the bar where you were drinking."

"Yeah. I can touch my damn nose. I just want my boyfriend, and he's being difficult," he said, clumsily touching the partition with his finger, then lifting its tip upward and making a funny face. "Let me in already, I need to get to my bed."

Nattawat shook his head and continued laughing, watching him.

"Alright," he sighed and pulled him into the apartment by his hand. "Go lie down and sleep."

"But I'm not drunk," Norawit protested.

"Not at all. You're just swaying from the draft."

"Exactly," Titicharoenrak laughed, slowly taking off his shoes. "I even have focus... phosiku... fo-cu-si..."

"Focus," Nattawat said and smiled, untying his shoelaces.

"Oh, yeah. That's not impaired. I can perfectly see your cute face and how sexy you look in this stretched t-shirt," the man said and pulled him towards him, gripping its edge in his fist.

He slipped his hot hands under the soft fabric and pressed his body against the wall. His persistent fingers immediately began to caress the skin gently, causing an uncontrollable rush of goosebumps for Nattawat.

"Get off me, you reek of Hendrix," he said with a slight smile.

"I've heard that somewhere before," Norawit laughed and began kissing his neck.

"Cut it out, Titicharoenrak. I'm not sleeping with you when you're drunk. You know that."

"Hmm," he responded hoarsely, sucking the tender skin with his lips and leaving hickeys on it.

The man pulled his t-shirt off his shoulder and slid his lips along the elegant curve of his collarbone, leaving wet trails. Nattawat allowed himself to enjoy the pleasant caresses for a few seconds, then sighed loudly, closing his eyelids, and tried to gently push him away.

"You know, drunk sex has its advantages," Norawit whispered playfully in his ear and grinned.

"Like what? Name one substantial one, maybe I'll think about it," Nattawat said and led him to the bed, holding his waist from behind.

"Mmm," Titicharoenrak drawled and fell onto the soft mattress, then propped himself up on his elbows, lying on his back. "No inhibitions? Drunk sex is usually so liberating, mother of God. I did things with one guy while drunk that I would never have done sober. Good thing we don't see each other anymore."

"Ah, so you were holding back before?" Nattawat laughed.

"Maybe you'll never know until you compare," he replied with a mysterious smile, then sighed deeply, and the corners of his plump lips slowly drooped downward.

"What's wrong?"

"Forgive me, baby."

"For what?" Nattawat asked in surprise, sitting on the edge of the bed beside him.

"I slipped up. I stayed sober for so long thanks to you, but I just couldn't control myself this time. I didn't even notice when I started drinking. Phu was drinking, and I just... I don't know."

"It was a heavy conversation, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But we needed to talk to him personally again about all this. He doesn't seem angry and doesn't blame me, but..."

"You blame yourself."

"Yes. I can't help it. This feeling eats so deeply inside me. I understand you're angry with me now for what I did, so I'm asking for forgiveness, but I..." the man sighed again, "all of this was too much for me. Forgive me, baby."

"I'm glad you admit your guilt. The fact that you understand this isn't normal means a lot to both of us."

"If you want, I'll sleep on Jumu's bed so you don't have to breathe this disgusting smell, just don't be too angry with me. I really love you so much and I'll try to be better. You're not going to leave me because of this, are you?"

"You're such an idiot, Norawit."

Nattawat looked at him for a long time with a tender smile, running his fingers through his soft hair. Norawit lay completely on his back and nuzzled against his hand, closing his eyes in pleasure. A little more and he'd be purring just like his pet. It seemed he really wasn't as drunk as he appeared. Getting some grounding in the form of the bed was releasing him somewhat. At least, the words he was saying sounded very convincing and clear. His tongue wasn't twisted and he didn't feel bad. His consciousness was completely fine, but he was finally able to fully relax under the influence of alcohol.

"I hope you won't find comfort in this again after this random slip-up?" Nattawat asked seriously.

"No. I know how unpleasant all this is for you. I'll fight with myself again, I promise. I'll try."

"Alright. If that's the case, you're forgiven. I understand why you slipped up. I don't approve at all, but I understand. Alcohol should never be your comfort, so try not to give in to this temptation again," Nattawat replied and leaned down to kiss his forehead. "Sleep now, I still need to clean up the dishes. You ignored dinner, after all."

"I missed dinner too. God, I'm a terrible boyfriend," Titicharoenrak moaned and frowned. "And that's it? You're not even going to yell at me, even though I'm so guilty?" he asked with the most innocent eyes, shining under the influence of intoxication.

"Norawit, I don't think you need my yelling in this situation. I already told you once that I have no right to judge you for this, especially not now. You know, I would have gotten drunk myself to forget the nightmare happening around us for at least a day."

"You're the best man in the world, you know?"

"Go to sleep, you're already rambling," Nattawat smiled, feeling a slight embarrassment from such pleasant words.

"Will you kiss your favorite boy goodnight?" Titicharoenrak asked and squinted cunningly with a sly smile.

"Are you talking about Jumu?" the man teased. "Oh yes, definitely. We've improved our relationship after dinner together."

"I must be dreaming. You, Jumu, dinner," he laughed.

"Go to sleep already," Nattawat said, smiling.

"Kiss me. Just once, but on the lips. I missed you so much."

"You'll do without. You need to rinse your mouth first, it reeks of gin from a mile away."

"And aren't you supposed to love me in any way? Sober and drunk, including," Titicharoenrak said thoughtfully, examining the ceiling. "Have I always had such a beautiful chandelier?"

Nattawat laughed heartily, watching Norawit.

"I love you, but I'm still not sleeping with you tonight."

"Don't I turn you on when I'm drunk? You just don't know what you're refusing," the man said, turning to him and sliding his hand along his thigh to his groin, then gently squeezed his member.

"Norawit, no," Nattawat said warningly and hit his palm.

"Just once?" he asked, amusingly squinting one eye.

"No."

"Half a time?"

"No."

"You don't even have to undress completely."

"No. Don't bargain with me."

"Want me to let you fuck me later?"

"Are you that desperate?" Nattawat laughed, surprisedly raising an eyebrow.

"I need you right now, baby. Ready to make any sacrifices. You're the only man I would let do this to me."

"Sounds so tempting."

"I've been thinking about you since this morning, since you got out of my bed naked. Come on, I'll be quick," Titicharoenrak begged, untying the drawstring on his sweatpants.

"Go to sleep. You'll pass out in five minutes, like last time when you were drunk."

"I'll finish in five minutes."

"Three will be enough for you."

"Are you asking for it?" Norawit raised an eyebrow. "You understand that throwing such words around near me is at your own expense. Even in this state, I can fuck you so hard you won't be able to sit tomorrow."

"Get lost."

"I would have been offended, not knowing the truth, you liar," he giggled drunkenly and pulled him toward him by the hand. "So can I take that as a yes?"

"What a horny idiot you are," Nattawat laughed and shook his head. "How about when you sober up, then you won't finish in twenty minutes, and that's more to my liking."

"Well, at least show me your gorgeous ass. I'll jerk off to it quickly and sleep with a peaceful mind and empty balls," Titicharoenrak said, taking off his t-shirt.

"You're a sick pervert."

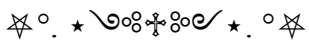
"Said the one who was jerking off in my shower while I was on the phone?" the man smiled, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Go to hell," Nattawat snorted and went to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

"At least show me your sexy abs, baby," Titicharoenrak whined like a child and unzipped his pants. "That's enough for me."

"Get lost!" a shout came from the other room, followed by an adorable laugh.

"What a shame."



They were warned about the first stage of “Powerslide” exactly an hour in advance, just as promised.

It seemed Lim always kept his word.

The message arrived on both their phones at the same time — the same address, the same brief text — while they lay late at night in the quiet safety of their bed. Neither of them was asleep. Sleep had refused to come for days now, chased away by the relentless tension coiled tight inside their chests.

Norawit stared up at the pale ceiling, absently threading his fingers through the hair of the boy resting against his chest. Nattawat listened to the frantic rhythm of Norawit's heartbeat and slowly traced the black letters inked by his own hand along the curve of Norawit's ribs.

At first, neither of them moved when the notification chimed. They already knew what it would say.

Still, Nattawat let out a deep breath and reluctantly shifted, climbing over Norawit to reach for his phone on the nightstand. He read the message quickly, then, his voice rough and low after long hours tangled together, said the words that now stirred nothing but dread inside them both.

"The race begins."

Norawit exhaled slowly and said nothing.

Nattawat tossed the phone aside with faint irritation and immediately returned to the warmest place in the world. Norawit's arms were his safe haven. Only there did he feel needed, loved, significant. Only Norawit could wrap him in tenderness so completely it felt like an unbreakable cocoon. Beside him, the world didn't seem quite so terrifying.

He never missed a chance to be held like this. No one embraced him the way his boyfriend did, and that simple truth filled him with quiet happiness.

They both knew they had to be at the starting line in an hour. If they were late, the consequences would be severe. But neither of them rushed to get up.

Norawit simply pulled him closer, an arm firm around his waist, and Nattawat pressed a few soft kisses to his chest in return.

Only Damien knew what would truly happen if they were late. He could do anything he pleased to them. Kill them. Hurt them. Tamper with their memories. Their fates had always rested in his hands.

The pressure felt suffocating tonight. It was as if they could physically feel the device embedded in their necks — a barbed collar tightening with every passing minute before the race. Like a leash held by the villain of a cruel fairy tale.

But an hour was still an hour.

So they stayed where they were, clinging to each other, knowing this might be the last time. Every stage of "Powerslide" was a gamble with death.

"Do you think they'll put us in the same pair?" Nattawat asked thoughtfully, propping himself up on one elbow.

"Doesn't matter," Norawit replied, brushing the curve of Nattawat's jaw with the bend of his finger. "Even if they split us up, I'll still be on your side. We're not rivals. We never will be. I'm nowhere near your level, great racer."

“You’re better than you think,” Nattawat said quietly. “If you doubt yourself, you’ll lose. Focus on your own driving. I’ll handle it. But you… you need the win.”

“I’m not afraid of losing to you,” Norawit said with a soft smile.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Nattawat murmured, searching his eyes. “For us, losing means death. If you end up at the back—”

“I won’t,” Norawit cut in gently. “I’m not the strongest driver in this race, but I’m not finishing last. I had the best teacher, didn’t I? How could I lose?”

He cupped Nattawat’s face in his hands, tender and steady.

“I’ll be fine, baby.”

“Promise?” Nattawat asked, and the raw worry in his voice made Norawit’s heart flutter painfully.

“Only if you promise me the same.”

Nattawat gave a small nod, then leaned down and kissed him softly, pouring every unspoken fear and feeling into that simple touch. The anxiety was driving him insane, but he knew Norawit too well. He trusted him to fight with everything he had to survive this madness.

And Nattawat’s only mission was to stay by his side.

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There were only six of them, and not all of them would make it to the next stage.

The moment they reached the designated address, there would be no turning back. Truthfully, there already wasn’t.

By someone’s twisted whim, they had been forced to race against each other. But whoever had placed them in the same heat had made a grave miscalculation. They would never become rivals. In this madness, they would survive together—until the very end, at any cost.

The first decisive run of *Powerslide*—a race not just for victory but for survival—began in one of the city’s elite districts and ended near Union Station. As they approached the improvised starting line, they spotted their opponents already lined up in two neat rows, engines idling, waiting. They had no choice but to park last, claiming the worst possible position.

So it was official—they were allies tonight. The other pairs had already been assigned.

Titicharoenrak slipped the small earpiece Pahn had given them into his ear and dialed her. She was already at her laptop, prepared for whatever chaos tonight would bring. They might not need her help—but they weren't taking chances. After the last race, none of them were naïve enough to expect sanity.

On her screen, she could see the live feed from the starting point. On the left side, columns of numbers leapt up and down like frantic heartbeats.

Bets.

It looked like the stock market. Each driver was a commodity, their value rising and falling with the crowd's excitement.

Nattawat was leading. Most of the money was on him, the numbers climbing at an almost absurd rate. His reckless brilliance during the qualifiers had stunned everyone. Close behind his name was Norawit's.

If they finished first tonight, someone would walk away very, very rich.

"You connected?" Pahn asked, fingers flying across her keyboard. "I'm pulling up your route."

"I'm here," Norawit replied, fastening his seatbelt.

"Same," Nattawat added, joining the call.

"Good. I'll guide both of you. Good luck, boys. And let's hope everyone's brakes are working tonight?"

"I hope so too," Norawit muttered.

"Got any inspiring words for us?" he added with a faint smile. "In case this is the last time we talk."

"Please don't die," Pahn said flatly.

"How motivating," Nattawat replied dryly.

Norawit huffed a quiet laugh and glanced at the navigation device mounted on his dashboard. For now, it showed nothing but a pulsing red dot—his current location. The route wouldn't appear until seconds before the start. It was revealed to the viewers first.

He had no desire to test what would happen if he deviated from it.

The device embedded in his neck was reminder enough. One wrong move, and it could activate.

"Countdown," Pahn said, tension threading through her voice.

On Nattawat's small display, a winding line flickered into existence—their route. Large numbers followed.

Seconds.

Norawit rolled his shoulders and turned his head sharply left and right until his neck cracked. He stared through the windshield.

Strange, wasn't it? They weren't in some abandoned industrial zone. This was still the city. And yet not a single streetlight was on.

As if someone had switched off the world just for them.

Engines roared to life one after another. The sound vibrated through the air, thick with the scent of gasoline and burnt rubber.

Adrenaline had a smell. It smelled like this.

A sharp signal blasted from overhead speakers.

Every car launched forward.

They stayed close to their pair. They'd been warned: if one partner died, both would be eliminated. No one knew if it was true.

No one wanted to find out.

They tore through the city center, flying across empty intersections. Engines howled. Tires screamed against asphalt. Fear pulsed hot in their blood, sharpening reflexes, feeding aggression.

Two cars ahead blocked Norawit relentlessly. Every time he tried to overtake, they moved in sync—swerving, slowing, cutting him off.

"Damn it!"

"Easy," Nattawat said, pulling up beside him. "No sudden moves, baby."

"We have to pass them. I'm not staying in the back."

"And we won't. Technique over emotion. You're left, I'm right. Intersection's coming—we take it there."

"Wait," Pahn cut in.

"What?" Nattawat asked, easing off the gas.

"The route just changed. It's different for each of you now."

"What the hell does that mean?" Norawit demanded.

The cars ahead suddenly split off, veering in separate directions.

“What’s happening?” he muttered, slipping past them and continuing straight.

“I think I get it,” Pahn breathed. “Avalon Boulevard—then right onto 41st South.”

“Why split us?” Nattawat frowned. “What’s the point?”

“You all have the same destination,” she explained quickly. “Different routes, same finish. You have to reach it first. I’m trying to figure out why they did this. Just follow my instructions.”

Nattawat surged forward, overtaking Norawit with a sharp burst of speed. A smirk tugged at his lips before he settled right in front of him, close enough to nearly kiss his bumper.

He never gave Norawit mercy—not in races, not in training.

And Norawit wouldn’t have it any other way.

They moved in seamless coordination, just like on The Loop during their paired runs. Nattawat led; Norawit followed. Sometimes they switched. The rhythm never broke.

“Right in one hundred twenty meters,” Pahn directed. “Then South Alameda all the way to Chinatown Station—straight to North Main.”

“Copy that, navigator.”

They took the turn in a perfect drift, one after the other, shot through a narrow side street, and burst onto South Alameda.

“Shit,” Pahn suddenly breathed.

“What?” Norawit tightened his grip on the wheel.

“I see it now.”

“See what?”

“It really is a timed competition. The pair that makes it in time won’t just win—they’ll survive.”

“We already know last place dies,” Nattawat snapped. “What are you saying?”

“Your routes are equal distance. They all lead to a single point—right after the railroad tracks. That’s tonight’s finish line.”

“And?”

“I checked the train schedule. A freight train is scheduled to pass that exact crossing at the same time your race ends.”

Silence.

Norawit's eyes flew wide as he glanced at his mirrors.

Nattawat understood a heartbeat later.

If they didn't make it across before the train—

They'd slam straight into it.

Stopping wasn't an option. They'd been warned: stopping was against the rules.

Cowardice wasn't forgiven here.

"Are you telling me we're racing toward a damn train?!" Nattawat shouted.

"If you don't reach the crossing in time, you collide with it. All of you. You have seven minutes."

"No—no, no!" Norawit panicked. "We won't make it!"

"Pahn, do something!" Nattawat barked.

"I—I'm not sure I can."

"Switch the tracks! Reroute it! Stop it!" Nattawat's voice cracked. "It's a system. You can hack it. If anyone crashes at this speed, it won't just be them—we'll all go with them!"

"They're insane!" Norawit yelled. "Sick bastards!"

"They don't care," Nattawat said grimly. "To them it's just part of the show."

"I'll have to breach the city transport control system," Pahn said rapidly. "Find the exact train, override the route."

"Then do it!"

"That's prison time."

"Pahn!" Nattawat shouted, panic edging into his voice. "Shut down every road if you have to —but stop that train! We have minutes!"

"…Okay. I'll try. Hold on."

They took the final bend on their route at full speed—and spotted two cars ahead.

The leaders.

The gap wasn't huge. They could still catch them.

And then—

In the distance, faint but unmistakable—

A train horn.

Low. Prolonged.

Getting closer.

The others didn't react. Why would they? They were near Union Station. A train was nothing unusual.

Smart, Damian.

Very smart.

Nattawat understood perfectly well that if they didn't make it now, they were finished. At least one of them had to break ahead. That was why speed mattered so much in this run, why one victory determined the fate of the other. Even alone, making it in time was nearly impossible.

He drove like a madman, and Norawit followed him as if they were a single machine. He wove through the road, pressing the gas when Nattawat did, easing off when he did — they moved as a flawless tandem. Together they felt like one car split into two bodies, predicting each other's next move with instinctive precision. All those paired training sessions were finally paying off. Their opponents clearly didn't have that kind of connection. Nattawat and Norawit simply felt each other, and that was an advantage no one else could copy.

Nattawat focused only on the taillights of the two cars ahead, forgetting about the others who were supposed to be catching up from behind. He didn't care about the two who would be chasing them now. He wasn't used to losing. And this wasn't about dominance in the "Powerslide" stage — this was about survival. The urge to live burned fiercely inside him because he understood exactly how dangerous this was.

He was about to overtake one of the sports cars when, suddenly, Norawit surged forward without even using acceleration. Nattawat couldn't help the proud smile that tugged at his lips as he followed Norawit's car with a quick glance. He'd lost sight of him for only a few seconds, and Norawit had already passed him.

In that moment, Nattawat felt an overwhelming pride — as his teacher, and as his boyfriend. Norawit wasn't holding back. He was driving at the absolute edge of his limits, and for the first time, the student was surpassing the master. Not in practice. Not in theory. In a real race.

Nattawat was so foolishly happy about it that he didn't notice the danger hurtling toward them from around the bend.

A white Lamborghini shot forward, aiming straight at Norawit's Porsche, clearly intending to ram it at full speed.

"Norawit, left!" Nattawat shouted in terror.

Norawit glanced sideways and jerked the wheel just in time, swerving out of the collision line. He avoided the catastrophic crash — but the car spun violently, tires screaming against the asphalt. The white Lamborghini, unable to recover, slammed into a pole at full speed.

The impact was deafening. A sickening crunch of metal echoed through the night. The car practically wrapped itself around the obstacle, smoke pouring from the twisted wreckage.

Nattawat sped forward — then heard the piercing squeal of Porsche tires. In his rearview mirror, he saw Norawit's car still spinning out of control. Somehow, barely, Norawit managed to keep it from hitting anything else. He didn't have experience in a situation this horrific, but he fought for control with everything he had. The world spun before his eyes as he struggled to steady the wheel in his shaking hands.

Miraculously, he did. He yanked the handbrake, the car skidding toward the roadside before the engine stalled. Silence fell. For several seconds, Norawit sat frozen, too afraid to move.

"Norawit, I'm coming back," Nattawat said immediately.

"Don't you dare slow down! Go!" Norawit shouted, snapping back to himself. "You have to win!"

"But you—"

"I'll catch up!"

"There's the train— if you don't make it—"

"I will! If you finish first, we both win! They won't be able to kick me out after your victory!"

Nattawat bit his lip hard, then slammed the gas.

He was right. It was a paired run. If Nattawat finished first, they both survived this round.

As Norawit spun the car around and accelerated again, Nattawat caught up to the two drivers ahead. He pulled even with one of them, engines roaring side by side. The Mustang growled like a wild beast, heat radiating through the metal as if the car itself was alive. His emotions burned white-hot — fury, fear, adrenaline.

All he could think about was that the man he loved might die if he didn't win.

The driver beside him started playing dirty, trying to edge him off the road. Nattawat noticed in time, swerving smoothly, the Mustang's rear sliding just slightly before he surged ahead and left him behind. Childish tricks. Desperation.

Now only one remained — a yellow sports car right in front of him.

Then he heard it.

The long, blaring horn of a train.

To their right, headlights cut through the darkness. The train barreled down the tracks, warning signals flashing.

They were all racing toward the same point.

And they all knew it.

The driver in yellow began slowing in panic. Norawit, closing the distance behind them.

Nattawat braked carefully to avoid crashing into the yellow car, then steered around it. The other driver surrendered, unwilling to risk certain death.

But Nattawat kept going.

Cowardice wasn't an option here. He had no doubt that backing out would earn punishment far worse — poison in the blood, a bullet in the head. Lim wouldn't tolerate weakness.

The horn blared again.

Nattawat's heart pounded so violently his vision darkened. He glanced back at the Porsche again and again, silently praying Norawit would make it.

"Pahn," he breathed, fear thick in his voice.

"I'm trying," she replied, her voice shaking. "The system's locked—"

"Pahn, there's no time!"

He flew over the railway crossing just as smoke flares exploded along the barriers, signaling the winner.

He'd made it.

But it wasn't over.

He pulled off to the side and jumped out of the car. The second-place driver parked nearby, staring at him in shock.

Nattawat didn't care.

He watched as Norawit sped toward the crossing — another car behind him — while the train roared closer, horn screaming into the night.

"Pahn!" Nattawat shouted desperately.

"I— I need a few more seconds! It's automated. Damn it!"

"There are no seconds! They're going to collide!"

"The brakes aren't working," Norawit said quietly over the comms. "They just… stopped."

“What?!” Nattawat and Pahn yelled at once.

Pahn’s fingers flew over the keyboard. “There’s no conductor. It’s automated. I can override it. I have to.”

The shriek of metal on metal split the air.

The train began to slow.

The sound was unbearable — but it meant hope.

It screeched along the tracks, decelerating just enough to buy them precious seconds.

Norawit blasted across the crossing at full speed. The second car followed. Moments later, the train thundered past and finally ground to a halt, blocking the road completely.

Pahn had won them five seconds.

Five seconds that saved their lives.

Nattawat exhaled shakily, running both hands over his face as he heard Pahn sobbing in relief through the earpiece.

“You did amazing,” he said softly. “You saved us.”

But then he saw it.

Norawit’s Porsche slowed — and this time, the brakes worked perfectly.

Realization hit like a punch.

It had been sabotage.

The car was Damian’s gift.

First someone tried to ram Norawit. Then his brakes failed.

Too many coincidences.

“Damn it,” Nattawat muttered.

He turned off the comms and ran.

Norawit stepped out of the Porsche on trembling legs, scanning the road in shock.

Nattawat didn’t slow down. He crashed into him, arms wrapping tight around his body, holding him so fiercely it hurt.

Norawit buried his face in Nattawat’s neck, feeling the frantic pulse beneath his skin, breathing in that faint scent of cherry blossoms.

Only then did it sink in.

They had survived.

Again.

“I almost lost my mind,” Nattawat whispered hoarsely.

“Me too,” Norawit replied, clutching him tighter. “When the brakes failed… I thought I’d never see you again.”

“You’re shaking.”

“Adrenaline,” Norawit breathed. “I nearly died twice in one race.”

“It’s over,” Nattawat murmured, holding his waist tightly. “It’s over.”

Norawit shook his head faintly. “No, baby. It’s only just beginning.”

Nattawat nodded. He knew.

“They really tried to kill us,” Norawit said, disbelief lacing his voice. “Powerslide isn’t about winning. It’s about surviving.”

“I realized that in the qualifiers,” Nattawat replied. “When they cut people’s brakes.”

“And you still came back for me.”

“I always will.”

“Why?” Norawit asked softly, cupping his face.

Nattawat rested his forehead against Norawit’s.

“Because my life is you,” he said quietly. “I don’t care what else they throw at us. I’ll burn, drown, break — whatever it takes. I’d die for you without hesitation. I’d walk into hell for you. In this universe and the next. Just don’t ever let go of my hand.”

His lips hovered inches from Norawit’s.

“I love you,” he whispered. “So much I can’t breathe without you.”

Norawit’s thumbs brushed his cheekbones tenderly.

Nattawat had never spoken words like that so openly before. But when it came to him — to this man in his arms — nothing else mattered.

They had survived.

And they would keep surviving.

Together.

All of it knocks the air straight out of Norawit's lungs, leaving him even more undone. He can't form a single coherent response; his whole body is trembling too hard for that. But this—this is the most beautiful thing he has ever heard in his life.

In those few fragile seconds, he feels like the center of the universe of the one person who matters most to him. And what could possibly be greater than that? No one has ever loved him the way Nattawat does. No one has ever held him with such fierce certainty. And Norawit knows, with absolute clarity, that he will never let him go—no matter the cost.

"Never," Titicharoenrak breathes, barely audible, before leaning in to kiss him softly, desperately, pulling him as close as humanly possible. "I will never let you go."

In that intimate moment, dozens of eyes are fixed on them, watching from behind screens and barriers—but they have completely forgotten about the audience.

All except one.

Hwang watches the broadcast with a dark expression, exhaling sharply as anger coils inside him. His plan has been ruined. Something went wrong tonight. That boy has cheated death twice, and now he stands there in full view of everyone, kissing his boyfriend as if dancing on the grave of the very scheme meant to end him.

This sweet little lovers-versus-the-world narrative needs to end. Permanently.

"You ruined everything," Hwang says coldly, turning his head toward Damian, who stands beside him.

"It was a technical issue. The train was programmed correctly. Technology glitches sometimes," Lim replies calmly, scrolling through a report on his tablet.

He already knows the truth: this wasn't a technical failure. It has a name—Pahn Pathita. A small hacker with a dangerously brilliant mind. She's working with them. She's even smarter than he anticipated. She hacked the control system and stopped the train. Impressive.

But she left traces.

And he has already found them.

If the man beside him learns that, she won't survive long enough to make a second mistake.

"Did you find the error?!" Hwang snaps.

"No. It may have been mine. I should have double-checked," Damian answers evenly, unfazed by the shouting.

"Your only job is to do your work properly! And you can't even manage that! Useless!" Hwang snarls, grabbing him by the collar and glaring at him with open hatred. "I told you this race had to be perfect!"

“And what exactly wasn’t perfect?” Damian smirks faintly. “A spectacular race. One fatality. The audience bet on Jirochtikul and Titicharoenrak — both delivered. People won large sums and left satisfied. The only problem here is your personal disappointment that Norawit survived. So keep your hysteria to yourself. I did my job. That minor flaw was noticed by no one but you and me. The race was flawless.”

“You were supposed to kill him.”

“No. He was supposed to kill himself. Titicharoenrak prepared better than you expected.”

“You disabled his brakes?”

“As ordered. And then restored them.”

“Then how the hell is he still alive? There shouldn’t have been anything left of him! How did he survive?”

“Maybe you should ask him,” Lim says boldly, nodding toward the screen where Nattawat’s image flickers. “I warned you that bringing him into this was a mistake.”

Hwang shoots an irritated glance at the screen and releases Damian’s shirt. He turns back to the broadcast, staring at it for a long moment, calculating.

Tonight, the two of them shattered his plans. One survived. The other clearly helped make that happen. Nattawat Jirochtikul has once again made his choice—and it was the wrong one. He was given a chance to think. He chose not to.

Then he will bear the consequences.

“The second stage is a solo run,” Hwang says slowly. “Which means their little team effort ends here. For Titicharoenrak, this will be the end.”

“What are you planning?” Damian asks.

“Use him,” Hwang replies, pointing at the image of a boy in a yellow sports car. “He panicked tonight, but he’ll be useful next time. I think it’ll make for a striking scene. Do something with that.”

“You want to make him part of the race?” Damian asks, surprised.

“Yes. He’ll be one of the obstacles. Make him do it.”

“Do what?”

“Kill Titicharoenrak.”

“You understand how risky that is in a solo run? Others could get hurt.”

“I don’t care. Nattawat is our star. Most bets are on him. The audience will be pleased. I’m certain he’ll finish first. He’ll win the race. And for his boyfriend, the second stage will be

the last.”

“He won’t race without Titicharoenrak.”

“Then you’ll make him,” Hwang says with a thin, anticipatory smile. “And if you perform as poorly as you did tonight, I’ll remind you exactly where you stand.”

He studies Damian for a few seconds, then pats his cheek mockingly and walks away.

Left alone, Lim exhales heavily and turns off the broadcast. He braces his hands against the table and lowers his head, thinking.

This has crossed every conceivable line.

Hwang is ready to go to any lengths to finish this cursed race. He’s so deep in his own madness that the only thing that might stop him now is a direct blow strong enough to shake him.

For the first time in his life, Damian wants to put an end to it.

But he doesn’t know how.

If Norawit dies in the second stage, Nattawat will never return here. That much is obvious. Hwang knows it too. And yet he has just made it clear: if Nattawat refuses to continue, Damian must force him.

Damian understands exactly how that threat would have to be carried out.

And he isn’t prepared for that.

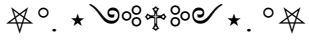
Hurting Nattawat is the last thing he wants. In fact, Nattawat might be the only person in this entire twisted world he feels an inexplicable urge to protect.

Hwang has clearly lost his mind.

Which means it’s time.

Time to speak to Nattawat face to face.

And open his eyes to everything.



The small two-story house in a quiet residential corner of Los Angeles looked almost unchanged from the outside. As if four lives hadn’t shattered within those walls. As if time

had simply paused there 10 years ago.

It was a typical American home with an attached garage: gray roof, white siding, narrow windows glowing with a soft, welcoming light. Across the road where Norawit had parked stood the same old mailbox, its red flag raised to signal fresh newspapers or bills waiting inside. The patch of green lawn where he used to play soccer with his father was still neatly trimmed. The large tree to the left—the one his little brother used to climb to sneak into the neighbor's window and play video games—had grown twice its size, its branches now stretching so close to the neighboring house that you could almost step across them. And on the porch, beneath the awning, sat the same woven chair where his mother had spent countless evenings.

Everything had changed. And nothing had.

The sight of it all pulled him under in a tide of bright childhood memories. The only signs of new life were the rose bushes blooming near the porch, lovingly tended by the current owner, and a Volkswagen parked by the garage.

Deep in his chest, Norawit felt a heavy ache as he drove up for the first time in years. But he was grateful. Grateful that the house had been cared for. That the place where he'd grown up hadn't turned into dust and forgotten sorrow.

It had never officially belonged to his family—they'd rented it their whole lives and planned to buy it one day. They just hadn't had the chance. After the tragedy, the owner had put it up for sale immediately. Who would want to buy a house with that kind of history?

Inside, everything was different. Nothing remained of what he remembered. It felt like another home entirely—yet it was no less warm. The air smelled of fresh pastries and cinnamon, and a small pug scampered around his feet.

Lorette had always loved to bake. When they were kids, she'd bring over sweets to spoil them. Norawit could still remember the taste of her blueberry muffins—he'd never found anything like them again in his life. And now she was feeding them to him once more.

For a moment, it felt like he was ten again, coming home from school while his mother was still on shift.

Lorette had always been kind to them, though others considered her strict and not particularly warm. Yet he found himself talking to her for nearly two hours—about everything and nothing. Despite the years and the age gap, he didn't feel like he was speaking to a stranger.

With Lorette, it was easy.

She listened carefully, offered gentle advice shaped by a lifetime of experience, and tried to understand him. He shared more than he'd planned to. It felt like visiting a grandmother he hadn't seen in years. He hadn't felt something this comforting since the last time he'd visited his real grandmother in Thailand—before his parents died.

Lorette laughed brightly at one of his high school stories, then rested her chin in her palm, gazing at him with warm, luminous eyes. They shone with such genuine affection it was as if she were looking at her own son returned home.

He understood why she watched him so closely. After her husband's funeral, this meeting must have felt like salvation. She was clinging to him like a lifeline to keep from drowning in her grief.

And he knew that feeling far too well.

"Thank you for dinner," Norawit said at last, finishing his bergamot tea with a small smile. "But I've stayed long enough. Nattawat will start worrying, and I shouldn't impose."

"No, no," she protested gently, taking his hand in her wrinkled palms. "You're not imposing. I'm so glad you came. It almost feels like your mother will walk in any second so we can chat over coffee. As if the years never passed."

"If only," he murmured with a soft sigh. "For me, it feels like a lifetime ago. I had to grow up too fast."

"You were just eleven," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "Carrying your little brother on your shoulders when you needed someone to carry you. How much strength does one boy have?"

"I'm running out of it," Norawit admitted quietly, lowering his gaze. "Sometimes I think I've reached my limit. Life keeps throwing new problems at me. I've learned to handle them by ignoring myself, but now… if one more thing hits me, I think I'll break."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes," he whispered. "I'm afraid I'll suffocate under it all."

Lorette pulled him into a tight embrace. Norawit wrapped his arms around her waist, inhaling slowly, fighting to keep his emotions in check. It was such a simple gesture—yet it nearly undid him. For the first time in a long while, he felt like a child again, sheltered by someone older and wiser.

He didn't know how he was still standing. Where did his strength come from?

Deep down, he knew.

It had the most beautiful, sincere smile in the world. And the most magical eyes.

Nattawat was his strength.

"You can endure this," Lorette said softly, stroking his hair. "Never give up. God doesn't send us trials we can't survive."

"Maybe I've had enough trials," he said with a bitter half-smile. "Don't I deserve peace? How many times do I have to score a nine out of ten on the pain scale before I'm allowed to

quit?"

"You've lost so much," she said gently. "But you've gained something rare. You found love. Real love. Few people ever do. Treasure it."

"It's more than love," Norawit replied quietly. "I can't even put into words what I feel for him. He's the only reason I don't fall apart. But I'm afraid of losing him. He's in danger right now. There are things I can't explain—it could have consequences."

"Can you protect him?"

"I'm trying. But not everything depends on me. I have to find someone—a bad person. When I do, this will end."

"Then keep fighting," she said, kissing the top of his head. "As long as you have someone worth fighting for, you can't give up."

"I won't," Norawit promised. "Not for him."

Later, when he stepped outside, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

His heart fluttered the moment he saw Nattawat's name.

How was dinner? Are you still there?

Norawit smiled foolishly.

It was good. She's packing blueberry muffins for you and asking why you're not with me. She wants us to come together next time.

A reply came almost instantly.

Wow, she sounds sweet. I'm already won over. So you're still there? How are you feeling? Want me to come get you?

No need. I'm okay. Better than I expected. Are you still at work?

No. Stuck in traffic.

A photo followed—Nattawat inside his Mustang.

Norawit stared at it for a full minute, shamelessly admiring him. Even after a long day, Nattawat looked unfairly handsome. One brow arched, chin tilted slightly up, eyes fixed on the camera with that bold, teasing look that always made Norawit's pulse race.

Hopelessly in love. That's what he was.

Hey, baby. What's it like being the most gorgeous man on the planet?

No idea. You'd have to tell me.

Norawit laughed under his breath, watching the three dots appear again.

See you soon? I miss you.

Soon. Would I really make you miss me more? Don't lock the door. I love you, baby.

A short video came in response—Nattawat humming along to music in his car, inching forward in traffic. He looked at the camera, let a few lyrics play, then waved and said in that low, warm voice that made Norawit melt every time:

"I love you too, baby."

Norawit replayed it twice. Three times.

Such simple words.

Yet they filled him with a happiness so intense it almost hurt.

He had waited so long to hear them that now he drank them in like proof that this—this fragile, precious thing—was real.

Miss Monroe walks over and sets a box of pastries on the table, gently smoothing a hand over his hair the way his mother used to. In just a few hours of talking with her, he has felt more warmth than he has in his entire life since the tragedy. An extraordinary woman.

"Here. Give this to your boyfriend. And next time, come together. I'll be waiting," she says, pressing a kiss to the crown of his head.

"Thank you, Lorie," Norawit replies with a soft smile, rising to wrap her in a hug.

"Come on, I'll walk you to the garage. Your things are there. You can take everything—or pick out what you'd rather throw away. I'll deal with it later. There's no rush."

He nods gratefully, takes the box of sweets, and follows her down the hall toward the exit. Lorette leads him into a small room with an automatic door and switches on the light.

Almost nothing has changed—except that it's much cleaner now. His father had never cared much about order in here, no matter how often his mother complained. He never let her tidy this place; it was his private refuge after long, tedious workdays. Tools and scraps of garage clutter used to lie everywhere. It's almost surreal. The same worn couch sags in the corner, its upholstery faded with time. Shelves still hold motorcycle parts and scattered tools. Old tires are stacked along the wall. The air carries the faint scent of motor oil, and the fluorescent lights buzz overhead.

The only thing missing is his father's motorcycle—the one North used to ride. In its place now stand cardboard boxes lined neatly along the wall.

"All of these are for me?" he asks quietly.

“Yes. There’s quite a lot. But I thought… you might want to go through them yourself. I kept what seemed important.”

“Can I stay here for a while? I just need—”

“You don’t have to explain,” she says gently, nodding with understanding. “Of course, dear. I won’t disturb you.”

For a few minutes, Norawit simply looks around. His gaze falls on the names written in marker across the boxes—his parents’ names, likely labeled by Lorette for convenience. There are far more boxes from his father’s study. That room had always been buried under books and stacks of papers.

With a tightness in his chest, he lifts the first box and sinks onto the couch, carefully sorting through its contents.

Compromising evidence could be anything. An object. A document. A photograph. A video or audio recording. Somewhere among all this, there must be proof—proof of whatever led to such horrifying consequences. If it’s even here at all. Lorette could have thrown it away without knowing its value. It’s hard to believe she managed to save anything.

For Norawit and his little brother, this house had meant everything. They were taken away the very night of the tragedy and never returned. They didn’t even have a proper family photo—except for the one his brother kept on a shelf, where their parents weren’t even present. And the single picture Norawit himself carried in his wallet all these years.

Now he holds an entire album—the story of their family—decorated by his mother’s own hands. Little floral stickers, lace borders, handwritten captions. She had made it herself and given it to his father for Christmas. He used to keep it in his desk drawer. They would flip through it together as a family, or he would take it with him on long business trips.

Norawit’s eyes skim the pages—until they stop on one photograph. His heart clenches so sharply it feels as though it’s shrinking inside his chest.

His mother and father sit wrapped in each other’s arms, smiling with effortless happiness. The picture was taken during a picnic by the Pacific Ocean. They’re seated on a checkered blanket; his father’s arm circles her waist, her hands resting over his strong forearms. They look impossibly beautiful—like a postcard you’d find online, not a snapshot of a real, once-happy family.

“I miss you so much,” Norawit whispers, brushing his thumb gently over their faces.

The longing is overwhelming. It fuels the aching desire for revenge for what was done to them. Looking at their smiles is almost unbearable. Memories flare brighter in his mind, and the echoes of terrified screams grow louder—but he forces himself to focus on his purpose.

He closes the album and reaches for another box.

An hour passes. Maybe more. He continues sifting through belongings without finding anything significant. Doubt begins to settle deep in his chest. What if there's nothing here? What if his father kept the evidence somewhere else?

But his father had always said the best hiding place was in plain sight. Most likely, it had been here—at home. He'd considered this house safe. It was just like him to hide something valuable right under everyone's nose. He used to keep his wife's presents in their bedroom or even in the kitchen where she spent most of her time. Strangely, she never found them before the right moment—or maybe she only pretended not to.

Once, he'd hidden a new ring inside her jewelry box. She had laughed for ages afterward, astonished she hadn't noticed it sitting right there in front of her. He had always known how to surprise her.

With a frustrated sigh, Norawit returns the books to their box. It's late. He should go home and take everything with him. Maybe he missed something out of fatigue or carelessness. He'll have to check again.

"This is pointless. I won't find anything like this," he mutters, shaking his head.

Several books slip from his hands and hit the floor. He inhales sharply, rolling his eyes, and bends to stack them again. When he lifts the last one, he notices something small lying on the ground.

He frowns and picks it up, turning it over carefully in his palm.

It looks like a voice recorder.

He checks the book—and finds a hollowed-out compartment carved perfectly to fit the device. His father had cut the pages to size and hidden it there all along.

"Well played, Dad," Norawit murmurs with a faint, incredulous smile.

He has no idea what's recorded on it—if there's anything at all—but a surge of electric anticipation fills him. He sits in the silence of the garage, broken only by the rain drumming against the roof, and hesitates.

Maybe, in his hand right now, he's holding the answer to the question that has haunted him for years: why were they killed?

That's why taking the final step feels so terrifying.

His hands tremble. So badly that he squeezes his eyes shut and tries to count in his head—but it doesn't help. Slowly, he runs his fingers over his wrist and hooks the small elastic band around it. He pulls it back and lets it snap sharply against his skin.

The sting steadies him.

Finally, he presses "play."

The silence in the garage shatters like a crack of thunder, broken by a voice so painfully, intimately familiar it makes his breath hitch—the dearest voice in the world, threaded with unmistakable nerves and roughened by years of smoking.

«Today… May 13th. It's 10:38 p.m. My name is Nook Titicharoenrak, and I work as a lawyer at a large corporation.»

Norawit hits pause almost the second he hears it — his father's voice, thin and trembling with fear.

The ground seems to vanish beneath his feet.

He never expected it to be a recording from him. He never even let himself hope he would hear his father's voice again in this lifetime. And it was recorded only days before his death — the last trace of him still alive, still breathing.

Damn.

It hurts far more than Norawit imagined it would.

He draws in several slow breaths through his nose, rakes a hand through his hair, and lets out a shaky, humorless laugh. God, this is hard. He wanted the truth so badly, chased it for so long — and now that it's finally in his hands, every instinct in him wants to retreat.

What will these answers bring him? Relief? Pain? Peace?

He doesn't know.

And not knowing makes the panic claw up his throat.

"No. I have to listen to this. I need answers. Come on, Dad…" Norawit mutters, forcing steadiness into his voice as he presses play again.

« I don't even know why I'm making this recording. I just needed to tell someone — anyone — but I can't speak to my wife or my colleagues. It's too dangerous. I can only hope that one day this will help in the investigation of my death.

Yes… you heard that right. If you're listening to this, I'm most likely already gone.

I'm almost certain my death will be violent. I've been followed for several days now. I think my time is running out… and he's found out. The person at the very top of 'Influence' knows that I've learned far more than I was ever meant to. I went where I shouldn't have.»

There's a faint rustle in the recording, the low hum of a car engine.

«Right now I'm sitting in my car outside my house. There's a man watching me from a black BMW — license plate 4IBL020. He's been tailing me since the office. I saw him yesterday. And the day before. They're waiting for something.

I'm in serious trouble.

God… I got myself into this without ever meaning to. I uncovered a secret — a massive one — about one of the most powerful men in this city. I discovered who he really is. The truth he's hidden from everyone for years. This information would cost him everything.

And he deserves to go to prison for it.»

Norawit's fingers tighten around the phone, knuckles white.

«I planned to take it to the FBI. But I'm afraid. It's too risky. I have a feeling everything here is bought and paid for. I don't know which officers can be trusted. I'm terrified for my family. I have a wife. Small children.

But I have to do this.

I have to be a decent man. How can I stay silent about something like this? The person responsible for such inhuman acts is still free. He walks among innocent people. Women. Children — the most vulnerable of all, unable to defend themselves against him.

I have to take the risk. Even if it costs me my life.»

The recording crackles softly before his father continues.

«It started when he approached me for independent legal counsel. I helped him at first. Tried to repair his reputation after a scandal, while he quietly strengthened his influence in the city. I thought I was working for a good man.

Until I dug deeper.

That's how I found the leverage on him. I began investigating him in secret. Something about him unsettled me — call it intuition. A bad feeling I couldn't shake.»

A long exhale.

«One day, I accidentally overheard a conversation between him and his personal assistant. They were talking about a child he had found in Georgia. He had ordered a DNA test. I managed to copy the results.

I kept digging. I uncovered the truth about the child's birth.

Everything fit.

The fact that he ran the test himself is proof of his involvement. Of his guilt.»

The next words come quieter, heavier.

«And I didn't stop there. God… the filth I uncovered. His shadow business. A murder. The child.

In reality, he deals in drugs, weapons… women. He cooperates with terrorists. And through it all, he eliminates obstacles without hesitation — and always walks away clean.

He’s not a man.

He’s an animal.

A wolf in sheep’s clothing.»

Norawit’s chest feels tight, like the air has thinned around him.

«I learned so much while pretending to work on another case for him. He trusted me. Gave me access to his documents under the guise of my legal duties. I risked everything, prying into his personal affairs.

And now I hold the full truth about who he is.

The deeper I went, the more horrified I became. I swear, I had no idea how vast his operations were. It’s all so tangled, so deeply buried… I could never have imagined it.

But the worst part?

I had no idea he was living a double life.

I’ve hidden the documents that prove everything. If I survive this, I’ll place them into the right hands. I know who needs to know the truth.

It may not save her.

But she deserves to know.

After all… she lives under the same roof as him.»

The recording cuts off, replaced by a flat, monotonous hum.

Norawit sits frozen, stunned by everything he’s just heard, and yet still unable to fully grasp it. He blinks slowly, trying to process the flood of information. His father never said the name of the man who killed him, but he mentioned “Influence.” He knew. God, he knew he was going to die because of all this, and still he kept digging into Hwang’s dirty secrets until he uncovered something that turned everything upside down.

A child? A DNA test? Some woman who knew? None of it makes any sense. From the recording, only one thing is clear: he was being watched, and someone was preparing to kill him. The most important answers were in those documents he had hidden. They had to be. That was where the truth lay.

Suddenly, a man’s voice rings out again in the hollow silence of the garage, even more frightened than before. Norawit flinches violently, nearly dropping the recorder when he hears the date.

The date of their murder.

This is the last recording of his father’s living voice.

«Today is May fifteenth. It's 10:05 p.m. I just put my children to bed, probably for the last time in my life and… God, I'm so scared right now. Not for myself, but for my family. I can see two cars outside the window. They've been sitting there for a while. They look suspicious. I think they're here for me. If they don't leave soon, I'll go out to them myself so they don't touch my family.

I… I just wanted to say… damn it, who am I even talking to? This is so stupid. I'm not even sure my death will be investigated, to be honest. No one cares about an ordinary lawyer. I just wanted to do something important before I died. To protect at least one person. I don't think she believed me, even with all the evidence. But I saw something in her eyes… I don't know. It was like she woke up from a dream. There was a flicker of understanding, of the horror of it all. But that child… that child is probably in great danger right now. Maybe she'll be able to save them. Because I don't know what to do anymore.

I wanted to help. I was going to take everything to the police, but then I realized they might all be working for him. I just wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to protect them, but… it seems I can't even guarantee my own safety.

Yes, it's foolish. I played detective for too long, and now it's too late. I can't step back, and I can't change anything. So… I don't know if anyone will ever listen to this. I hope so. Because the only people who will truly want the truth are my children. I want them to know why I'll be gone soon, and who did this to me.

Norawit and North, if you're hearing this, know that your father is guilty of nothing except being too curious. Remember this: curious people don't live long, and revenge is not worth your strength or your time. The only thing worth your effort is justice. My mistake was learning something I was never meant to know about a bad man pretending to be good. When you grow up, understand this — I was killed by Nuthwang Jirochtikul. I hope that by then he'll be rotting behind bars.

I love you both so much. I hope you grow into honorable men. Take care of your mother. Be strong. That's how sadly and heavily it all turned out. I should have been more careful, but… all right. I need to end this recording before I lose control. What should I say to you for the last time?

Ten minutes ago, I was sitting beside you, watching you smile, and I was completely happy. You are the best children I could have ever dreamed of. Always remember that, okay? I'm sorry I wasn't a good enough father.

I just read you that familiar poem. I read it almost every night, don't I? And your mother reads it when you're very scared. I love it, and I want you to remember it for the rest of your lives. It's important. Truly important. I trust only you, and I hope you'll be braver than I was.

But I'm not afraid right now. Dying is never frightening when you're running into death's arms to escape a terrible life. And that's what I'm afraid of — that if I don't deal with this myself, they'll turn our lives into hell.

So… my boys, who is it that offends the beautiful moon in the sky? Only recently she was full, and now she's about to fade. What gives her the strength not to surrender? To fill herself

with light in spite of her enemies? You'll find the answers to your questions in this poem.

I love you.»

This time, the recording falls silent for good.

About two hours later, Hwang's men stormed their house. Half an hour after that, they beat a defenseless woman to death. Twenty minutes later, the owner of that voice was gone too.

Norawit sat motionless for several long seconds. He simply couldn't force himself to move. He thought. He thought about everything that had happened that day, and about what he had just heard. His mind worked so furiously it felt as if his skull might split open, like a kettle shrieking on a stove.

He had said a name.

The damn name of his killer.

His father had known. Known that one day his sons would start searching for the truth. That was why he had recited that poem. It hadn't been random. It was a clue—clear and deliberate—meant only for them.

Suddenly Norawit shot to his feet and, stumbling, hurried toward the boxes. He rifled frantically through the unopened ones until he found the two labeled with his and his brother's names.

Nook Titicharoenrak had been a brilliant man. If he had said they needed to read that poem to find answers, he had meant it. And Norawit was almost certain he now knew what to do.

"God… of course. It's genius. You hid it in our room. Right in plain sight, and no one would ever have guessed," he muttered under his breath as he dumped the contents of the boxes onto the floor.

At last, he found it—a large book that had always stood on the top shelf in the bedroom he shared with his brother. The strangest part was that the author's last name was Hwang. That was why it had sounded so familiar. Their father had said it constantly, as if planting the name in their minds for months.

Norawit knew he wasn't mistaken. He had memorized that poem as a child and carried it with him for years after. The book had been read to them countless times. God, he had even used those same lines to soothe his brother more than once. Had their father truly planned it all from beginning to end, so they would hear his voice at exactly the right moment? Only they could understand. Only they would grasp the meaning behind that small game with the poem.

His hands trembling, Norawit opened the colorful book with the childish illustration on its cover.

Inside was a hollowed-out compartment.

The pages had been carefully cut away, and within lay a stack of documents.

There it was. The kompromat that had started it all. Just a few sheets of paper that had shattered at least four lives in an instant.

Norawit's eyes darted chaotically across the text on the first page, and suddenly he couldn't breathe. His lungs seemed to empty of air. His whole body began to shake so violently that the paper trembled in his grip. The letters blurred and jumped before his eyes; he couldn't read them at first. He forced himself to focus, to steady his breathing, and tried again.

"Certificate of Naturalization of a United States Citizen," he read slowly, scanning further down the page. "What the hell? Wait. Nut Jirochtikul? No. No, no, no. That's impossible."

He read it again from the beginning, but it only confirmed what he already feared. It was the original official document his father had stolen. The paper verified the legal name change of the current city judge at the time he received his citizenship many years ago. He had been born in another country and obtained citizenship while he was still an ordinary man.

The process itself was standard for any immigrant. Live in America long enough as a permanent resident, and you could apply to become a citizen. Norawit's own parents had come from Thailand; they had gone through the same procedure.

But this document revealed a secret. A massive secret about one of the most powerful men in their city.

Long before Nut Jirochtikul had taken office, long before he rose to influence, his name had been Nuthwang. He had simply split his name in two, choosing something that would be easier to live with in the States.

And this was proof that he was involved in criminal activity.

Air refused to come. It felt as though skeletal hands were squeezing his lungs, crushing his chest from the inside. The pain spread through him, sharp and unbearable. It was impossible to accept. All this time, the man who had destroyed his family had been standing in plain sight.

Worse—he was a representative of the law.

It felt like a nightmare Norawit couldn't wake from.

Then another realization struck him.

When it did, his heart seemed to shatter with a deafening crack, breaking into a billion pieces, his soul splintering with it. He winced as if the pain were physical.

"No… my God," he whispered, dragging in a ragged breath as he fought back the tears.

"Hwang is Nattawat's father."

Chapter 14: koi no yokan

His small, happy world was collapsing. So fast, faster even than the seconds slipping away in that fragment of time rushing mercilessly past him now, leaving Norawit suspended in a strange, hollow daze. He sank deeper and deeper into a state of utter exhaustion, his mind dull and drained, as if every last reserve of strength had been stripped from him.

His fragile, wounded heart shattered into a billion tiny shards. They pierced his soul, tearing it apart like the claws of some relentless predator, as if it were flesh meant to feed a starving beast. And that beast, in this moment, was pain, hungry for him to feel it down to his very bones.

The father of the man he loved with every cell of his body and every string of his soul had brutally murdered his parents ten years ago.

A respected city judge who had lived a double life all these years, secretly operating under another name as the founder of a criminal organization. The perfect cover from every angle. He was the face of the law, and at the same time, the embodiment of evil.

God… how was something like this even possible?

He had been so close all along, and yet impossibly far away. Untouchable. Unreachable. All this time he had known everything and simply laughed at their stupidity. Mocked his own son when he confronted him and demanded the truth. Watched with cruel amusement as Norawit desperately searched for him by any means he could.

It was almost impossible to believe that this man was truly that cursed Hwang.

Norawit forced himself to read everything again, this time more carefully, drawing several deep breaths. Besides the document confirming the change of name, there was a positive DNA test. There were photographs of Nuthwang with people who clearly weren't the kind anyone should associate with. There were financial statements tied to his filthy businesses. And court documents about the death of a very young woman.

According to them, the poor girl had been strangled.

The autopsy listed the cause of death as asphyxia—air cut off from the lungs by mechanical obstruction. There was no way it had been suicide or an accident. Someone had killed her.

And it seemed that someone was the father of Nattawat and Night.

Otherwise… why hide it?

Why would a judge secretly keep documents like these if they weren't direct proof of his guilt? Perhaps he had intended to destroy them, but never got the chance.

Everything here could clearly destroy that bastard's life in an instant, yet Norawit still couldn't fully grasp what it all meant. On the surface it was obvious, but nothing in his mind would fall into place. It felt as though some crucial explanation was missing.

He tried to pull himself together, to gather the shattered pieces of his thoughts into something coherent. But the longer his eyes moved over the printed lines, the weaker he felt. As if the words themselves were draining the strength from his body.

The pressure inside him grew unbearable, crushing everything beneath the brutal weight of reality. Norawit felt himself breaking apart into tiny particles that turned to shifting sand, dragging him deeper and deeper into the abyss of it all.

He had finally learned the truth he had spent years desperately searching for.

And he had been completely unprepared for it.

Just like his father once had been, he had fallen straight into the trap of his own curiosity.

Somewhere in the world, people were getting ready for bed, sharing dinner with their families, kissing their children goodnight, or wrapping their arms around the person they loved. Someone was falling in love for the very first time, while somewhere else another person was saying goodbye to love forever. Some hearts were breaking, and others were breaking them knowingly, already aware that no happy future lay ahead.

Life continued.

And none of them had the slightest idea that somewhere on this same planet, someone else's life was falling apart.

For Norawit, everything had stopped.

The Earth had ceased spinning on its axis. The sun no longer shone for him, turning the world into a frozen wasteland. The stars had gone dark. All the bright colors of life faded in a single instant until not a single shade remained of the rainbow's seven.

As if someone had simply snapped him in half with one small document.

One simple soul was dying right now, and no one could save it.

He sat almost completely motionless, barely breathing in shock, his trembling hands clutching the very things that had cost the lives of the people he loved most. Seconds passed. Minutes. Perhaps an eternity.

Still he could not move.

He didn't even fully understand why the truth felt so unbearable now that it stood before him.

A painful knot rose inside his chest, climbing toward his throat until he could hardly breathe. Nausea twisted his stomach. His lips slowly parted in a silent cry, and suddenly broken

sounds tore from his chest—pitiful, helpless noises that sounded more like the whimper of a wounded animal.

That was exactly what he felt like.

A frightened little puppy backed into a corner, crushed beneath the cruelty of the world around him.

And he was terrified of what he was feeling—terrified because he had no idea what to do with it.

The blow had struck far harder than he had ever imagined.

Norawit had always believed that once he learned the truth, everything would become simple. He would destroy the man responsible, accept whatever punishment followed, and finally find peace.

But now that the truth was in his hands, the hunger for revenge had only sharpened—twice as fierce as before. And yet he wasn't sure he would carry it out.

The reason wasn't cowardice.

It was Night.

That boy would never stand quietly by and watch what Norawit wanted to do. And Nattawat… Nattawat would almost certainly take his brother's side. Rationally, Norawit understood that they probably had no idea who their father truly was. At least, he desperately hoped so. Most likely they suspected nothing, and none of this was their fault.

But God, how was he supposed to explain that to his stupid heart?

Right now it felt as if someone had ripped it straight out of his chest and thrown it onto the floor.

He didn't know.

He simply didn't know, didn't understand anything at all. All he felt was the crushing weight of it, as if Hwang's expensive shoes were grinding him into the dirt. That bastard probably already knew about their relationship and was laughing somewhere at the pathetic irony of it all.

Every emotion inside him was sharpened to a painful edge. It felt like he would be torn apart if he didn't release them somehow.

There was so much of it.

Anger. Hatred. A growing desire for revenge that rolled larger and heavier like a snowball gathering speed. Pain. Disgust. Disappointment.

All of it mixed together into something monstrous, a toxic blend that reminded him of nuclear fuel.

Sooner or later it would explode.

Norawit knew it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a countdown had already begun.

Never in his life had he felt so weak. Yet something deep inside him was building, swelling rapidly, ready to break free.

“Nine and a half,” he whispered in a trembling voice.
“Nine and a half out of ten.”

For the first time in his life, his usual “nine” had been surpassed. And he discovered something terrible, that sometimes emotional pain was far harder to endure than physical pain.

He had broken arms, legs, and ribs before. He had suffered bruises and hematomas, been in fights where he’d staggered out barely recognizable, battered almost to mince.

But none of that compared to what he felt now.

This was the worst pain he had ever experienced in his short life.

Physical injuries faded with time. At most, they left scars on the skin, and sometimes not even that.

But wounds like this… they could bleed for years. They reopened every time someone touched them.

He already carried one like that inside him.

Now there was a second.

Happiness, it turned out, could collapse in a single tiny moment—with a deafening crack—despite the days, weeks, months, and years you spent building it.

Just one damned second.

And you would never be the same again.

Right now, Norawit couldn’t even imagine how he was supposed to walk up to Nattawat and tell him all of this. How could he shatter Nattawat’s heart right after his own had been destroyed?

Why did he have to be the one to cause that pain?

It was unbearably cruel.

He felt the last fragile barriers holding back his emotions begin to crack. Somewhere deep inside, the ropes restraining everything were fraying and snapping one by one.

He had to leave.

Right now.

If he stayed any longer, Lorette might come in and start asking questions he simply couldn't answer.

Norawit grabbed the recorder and the papers he had found inside the book. Forcing himself to move, he stood up and walked out of the garage.

He would collect the rest of the boxes later.

Right now he couldn't even think about them.

All he needed was to somehow pull himself together and breathe, just breathe, and not lose his mind from the weight of what he'd learned.

Outside, the rain had started again.

He tucked the documents under his jacket as he walked toward the car. Thunder rolled across the sky as loudly as the pounding of his own heart in his ears. Lightning flashed like bursts of divine fury.

But where the hell had God been when things like this were allowed to happen in the world?

Norawit threw the documents onto the passenger seat and grabbed the car door to steady himself as his knees suddenly buckled.

A panic attack seized his lungs.

Darkness crept into the edges of his vision, his body trembling violently. All he wanted was to erase everything from his mind.

It would be better that way.

Better for everyone.

He didn't need the truth.

As memories of happiness flickered before his eyes, memories of something he had once held in his hands but was now losing, Norawit realized that he had never needed this damn truth.

Not at this price.

"Why didn't I listen to you, Northie?" he whispered, closing his heavy eyelids.
"Why did I go looking for him?"

Countless memories rushed through his mind, all tied to the most important person in his life.

Their stupid first meeting in a supermarket parking lot, when Nattawat had nearly broken his nose and then awkwardly tried to flirt with him.

The nightclub. The drunken ride home.

Their first careful kiss and the night they spent together afterward.

The first race on the Loop, where Norawit had finally and irrevocably fallen in love with Nattawat's reckless boldness.

The tattoo inked by those careful hands, now burning like fire along his ribs.

Chases through Vermont Vista.

Their first time together in the Mustang on the Hollywood Hills.

The trip to Santa Monica.

Even the fortune teller's warning, that they were both in danger, came back to him now.

The happy trip to Ojai.

Their date beneath the open sky.

So much passion. So much tenderness. So many shy confessions.

So much love.

"Sexy suits you better."
"I don't know you that well yet, but I already admire your strength."
"If I don't save you, then who will?"
"Don't celebrate too early, you're still my sexy one."
"I like you, Norawit Titicharoenrak."
"I've belonged to you since the moment I broke my own rules and kissed you, even though you smelled like damn gin."
"I'm yours."
"I don't want to lose you."
"I'm always by your side."
"The problem is… my weakness is you."
"Koi no yokan."
"I trust you."
"If you fall, I'll catch you. If you fly upward, I'll fly after you."
"I love you."
"My life is you, Norawit."
"I'll do anything for you. In this universe and the next. Wherever we are. In any time, in any place. Always."

His gentle voice and that slightly silly, high laugh echoed endlessly in Norawit's mind like the most beautiful and tragic melody.

Every word now stabbed into his chest with unbearable pain, leaving bitterness on lips that missed Nattawat so desperately.

The memories played like scenes from a romantic film, one with a devastating ending.

Norawit couldn't understand how he would ever touch him again, knowing that the cause of his suffering all these years was Nattawat's own father.

Even if the man had never truly been a father to Nattawat… it was still an undeniable fact.

How was he supposed to live with that?

Right now it seemed impossible.

It wasn't Nattawat's fault, but that didn't mean Norawit could simply erase the knowledge from his mind. He couldn't pretend it didn't exist.

Every time he thought about Nattawat now, that truth would rise up with it.

And with it came flashes of that terrible night from his past.

But living without him… that felt just as impossible.

He was terrified.

Terrified because he didn't understand what was happening to him, because he couldn't regain control. His emotions raged inside his throat like molten lava.

Nattawat hadn't betrayed him.

So why did Norawit feel betrayed?

By someone, or something. Hell if he knew what.

Anyone in the world could have been the man Norawit had wanted to kill for so long.

But it had to be the one who gave life to Nattawat and Night.

"God…" Norawit whispered hoarsely, shaking his head.
"Why? Why him? Why does it have to be him? Why do you keep tormenting me like this? How much more are you going to test me?"

It was unbearable.

Everything inside him twisted together.

None of the stupid psychological tricks he usually used could calm him now. Not breathing exercises, not counting in his head, not snapping the rubber band on his wrist.

One half of his mind burned with fury and the uncontrollable urge for revenge.

The other half shattered under the realization that he couldn't accept this and simply move on.

Hot tears of resentment and terrible disappointment blurred his vision until he couldn't see anything at all.

Life had beaten him down many times before, but this twist of fate struck like a brutal blow to the gut.

Deep inside, something was breaking.

And he wasn't sure he would survive it this time.

The one thing that had saved him all these years was Nattawat.

And now he was losing him.

How could they possibly stay together after this truth?

Only unconditional love could survive something like that.

But was their love strong enough?

He couldn't breathe.

His lungs burned painfully, as if he had just run an entire marathon.

Norawit slowly stepped away from the car and staggered across the lawn, gasping desperately for air. Cool raindrops slid down his skin as though trying to soothe a pain that only he could understand.

But when thunder cracked violently across the sky, the volcano inside him erupted.

Sudden.

Violent.

Uncontrollable.

He wrapped his arms around himself and screamed at the top of his lungs, doubling over.

The sound tore from his throat so fiercely that his voice turned hoarse with raw despair. His vocal cords ached, and a sharp pain stabbed through his solar plexus.

He didn't care that it was nearly night outside, or that Miss Monroe's neighbors might hear him.

Let them call a psychiatrist if they wanted.

Because right now, it seemed no one else in the world could help him.

The scream finally broke, and he sank onto the wet grass, utterly drained.

As if someone had hollowed him out from the inside.

Norawit had no idea what to do next.

The person who had always been his refuge—who gave him peace, love, and warmth—was now so far away.

And even he might not be able to calm this storm.

Because it was his family that had created it.

Now Norawit faced the hardest decision of his life.

He stood at a crossroads, unable to take a single step.

What was the right choice?

To kill the father of the man he loved?

Or to let that monster live after everything he had done?

He had murdered Norawit's parents. Broken North. Broken Norawit himself. Killed Pond. Spent a lifetime tormenting his own sons.

And who knew how many other horrors he had committed?

Nuthwang didn't deserve to live.

But Night and Nattawat would never allow his death, no matter how much they hated him.

Unlike Norawit, they still had hearts.

It would be unimaginably difficult.

But first, he would have to tell the most important person in his life the truth about all of this.

And with that truth…destroy him forever.

Rain hammered loudly against the windows. Night had long since fallen, and the time for visiting people was already over, yet Norawit still hadn't come home.

Nattawat paced restlessly from corner to corner of the apartment, unable to sit still. Anxiety coiled tighter and tighter in his chest. For some reason, this was really bothering him. What had Norawit once said? That Nattawat always had a sharp instinct when something bad was about to happen. And right now, that was exactly what he felt.

Norawit wasn't answering his calls or messages. Nattawat didn't have Miss Monroe's number, and the storm raging outside didn't inspire much confidence. What if something had happened to him? Why hadn't he come back yet when he said he'd be home soon?

That "soon" had already stretched into almost two hours.

Something wasn't right. Norawit wouldn't make him worry like this without a reason.

Jumu was acting strange too. The little brat, it turned out, was terrified of thunderstorms. At first he had been darting around the apartment every time thunder cracked, but now, despite their less-than-friendly relationship, he allowed Nattawat to pick him up and pet him.

Or maybe the cat felt worried about his owner as well, because his gaze seemed unusually serious today. Thoughtful, almost. Jumu was rarely this quiet.

Nattawat tried calling again, but after a long series of rings the call went straight to voicemail. His heart felt heavy, and his imagination was already painting the worst possible scenarios.

Then the silence of the apartment was broken by a short ring from the doorbell.

Nattawat let out a deep breath of relief.

"Finally."

At this point he wouldn't even yell if Norawit came home drunk like last time. Surely there was a normal explanation for all of this.

He set Jumu down on the bed and hurried down the hallway. Without thinking, he opened the door, already ready to pull Norawit into a hug.

"You were the one who said the door—"

Nattawat froze.

His eyes landed on the unexpected visitor standing on the threshold, and his brows knit together in displeasure.

"—shouldn't be locked."

His first impulse was simple: slam the wooden door right into the bastard's face. But he forced himself to hold back, grinding his teeth.

Damian Lim himself stood outside his boyfriend's apartment.

And that definitely couldn't mean anything good.

Maybe he had brought bad news about Norawit?

Nattawat slowly looked him up and down, noticing the folder in the man's hands, and sighed irritably. As always, Damian looked flawless. Perfect suit, composed posture.

But something about him seemed off.

Surprisingly… upset.

Usually his face reflected nothing but arrogance and indifference, yet this time his eyes looked almost sad. Uneasy.

"What do you want?" Nattawat asked sharply.

"Hello, Nattawat," Lim said calmly, giving a short polite nod.

"Where is he?"

"Who?" the man asked, genuinely surprised.

"Don't play dumb. Where's Norawit? Did you do something to him?" Nattawat snapped.

"I have no idea where he is," Damian replied evenly. "And no, I didn't do anything to him."

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"You're very hospitable," Damian said with a faint smirk before letting out a quiet breath. "May I talk to you?"

The softness in his voice was unexpected.

For a moment Nattawat just blinked at him in disbelief before letting out a short, confused scoff.

"You're… asking instead of ordering? Wow," he mocked, raising an eyebrow. "Did hell freeze over or something?"

"Very funny," the visitor replied, the corner of his lips twitching slightly. "If Norawit isn't here, that's actually better. I'd prefer to speak with you alone. This conversation concerns you more than it does him."

"You're not just going to leave if I say no, are you?" Nattawat said suspiciously. "You'll just force your way in with threats."

"I could say nothing at all," Damian answered calmly, extending the folder toward him. "You could simply read this. But it will make much more sense if I explain the whole story."

"The whole story?" Nattawat asked, distrust heavy in his voice.

“Believe me, this conversation is in your best interest. I could suffer greatly if what I’m about to tell you gets out too early. But you need to know. Some of this truth shocked even me, and very little surprises me in this life. For you, it will be a real blow. Still, I want to tell you.”

Biting the inside of his cheek, Nattawat thought it over nervously. He didn’t want to let this man into their small sanctuary. But the temptation to learn something important was strong.

Someone like Damian Lim never showed up without a reason.

He was alone. No guards. Seemingly no weapon either. If he had intended to hurt him, he probably wouldn’t be standing here acting polite.

Damian could easily force his way in through threats, after all, he held the remote control to a very powerful means of manipulation, but right now he didn’t feel threatening.

Still, Nattawat had learned long ago not to trust him.

He quickly ran through a defense plan in his head in case the bastard tried something. Norawit’s gun was at home, inside the bedside drawer. If things went wrong, Nattawat could simply shoot him. He already knew how to use it.

Finally, he stepped aside, holding the door with one hand and nodding for him to enter.

Lim gave a grateful nod and walked into the apartment, glancing around with interest.

Nattawat led him to the room and stopped by the window, crossing his arms over his chest.

The man behaved with careful restraint, calm and polite. He didn’t touch anything he shouldn’t, merely scanned the unfamiliar room quickly before sitting down in an armchair and letting out a deep breath.

Jumu wandered over to his feet and looked up at him suspiciously. A new person meant investigation. The cat studied him carefully.

Damian extended a hand toward him but didn’t touch him right away, letting the cat sniff it as many times as necessary. Only then did he gently tap the pink nose with a finger, smiling faintly.

“I have a dog,” Damian said. “A Doberman named Van. I always dreamed of having a loyal companion. When I was a child, I wasn’t allowed to keep animals. Too expensive, too much trouble.”

He stroked Jumu’s head lightly with his knuckles.

“But once my mother gave me a goldfish. You know the kind, beautiful ones with big flowing fins.”

“I know,” Nattawat replied. “But honestly, a goldfish doesn’t really fit your image.”

“I wasn’t always like this,” Damian said with a quiet chuckle, falling silent for a few seconds as if remembering something. “Once I was just a normal child, like you or any other boy. It was a birthday gift. They told me to make a wish.”

“And? Did it come true?”

“I wish it hadn’t.” He smiled sadly. “I wished to find someone I had never known before. I’ve regretted it ever since.”

He glanced down again.

“Is this your cat?”

“No. Norawit’s. Honestly, it’s impressive that Jumu is sitting there calmly. It took me weeks before he let me pet him properly.”

“Jumu, huh?”

“Lord Jumu.”

Damian let out a low laugh, and Nattawat watched him carefully.

Had he ever laughed like that before? Without mockery, arrogance, or falseness?

It didn’t seem so.

Tonight he was acting strangely.

“I’ve always gotten along better with animals than with people,” Damian said quietly, still stroking Jumu. “They’re far better.”

“Did you come here to talk about that, or should we get to the point?” Nattawat asked, cutting him off.

Damian’s expression changed immediately. He placed the folder on his knees and sat in silence for several minutes, gathering his thoughts.

Nattawat waited tensely, drilling him with a heavy stare.

It was strange seeing this man like this—restless, nervous, genuinely troubled. Especially considering how calm and indifferent he usually appeared in public.

This probably wasn’t his real face, but it was likely closer to it.

“I’ll tell you a story first,” Damian said finally, staring thoughtfully at the floor. “Then I’ll answer your questions.”

“A story?” Nattawat frowned. “What does that have to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you,” Damian said with a small nod.

“You really know how to build suspense. Go ahead. I don’t have much time. Norawit still hasn’t come back, and I need to find him.”

Damian smirked at the boldness, then inhaled deeply as if preparing for something extremely difficult.

Nattawat watched him with open indifference, chin tilted slightly upward, until the very first sentence.

Then something inside him tightened sharply.

“Many years ago, in Georgia, there lived a girl named Abigail,” Damian began quietly. “She was smart, beautiful, the best student in her class—young and pure, like a real angel. She grew up in a strict religious family.”

“One day, an older man noticed her. A very respectable man, much older than she was. He fell madly in love with her. He courted her, tried to charm her, tried everything to win her over… but it was all useless.”

He paused briefly.

“And he wasn’t the type to give up easily. His love turned into a frightening obsession. In the literal sense, he was losing his mind over her.”

“And?” Nattawat started.

“Just listen,” Damian interrupted quietly. “This isn’t easy to tell. I’ve never said it out loud before. But it’s important.”

“…Fine,” Nattawat muttered, sitting down on the bed and glancing quickly at his phone.

Still nothing from Norawit.

“Abigail didn’t feel anything for him,” Damian continued. “But that didn’t stop him.”

Instead of leaving her alone, the bastard raped her one day… and then disappeared.

He moved to another city and stayed out of her life for several years.

“That’s brutal,” Nattawat said quietly, frowning.

“Oh,” Damian laughed bitterly, “that’s not the worst thing that happened to her.”

After what he did to her, nine months later she gave birth to a child, a healthy baby boy who looked like her parents.

“At least she was lucky in that way,” Damian murmured. “It might have been unbearable to see her attacker’s face in her own child every day.”

“Wait,” Nattawat said, eyes widening. “So she had the baby? From the man who raped her?”

“Exactly.”

“Jesus,” Nattawat whispered, running a hand through his hair. “That’s… strong. God, there’s so much awful shit in this world.”

“You’re more right than you know,” Damian replied quietly.

“So what happened to her?”

“She raised her son. The man, of course, was never punished.”

Damian leaned back slightly.

“And now we’re getting closer to the point. Abigail had a younger sister who grew up and moved away, hoping for a better life. One day she came back to Georgia to visit… with her boyfriend.”

Damian’s lips curled into a thin smile.

“Guess who he turned out to be.”

“No way…” Nattawat breathed.

“Yes. Years later, that bastard came back. Despite already being married at the time, he started a relationship with Abigail’s younger sister.”

“Of course she had no idea who he really was. She had been just a little girl when everything happened to Abigail. And when Abigail finally told her the truth… maybe she simply didn’t believe it. Maybe she loved him too much.”

Damian shrugged lightly.

“His obsession clearly hadn’t faded. The sisters looked very similar. He knew exactly what he was doing. Abigail’s sister reminded him of her when she was young.”

He paused.

“And then he saw her with the child.”

Silence filled the room.

“He figured it out. The timing matched. He realized the boy was his son.”

Damian’s voice grew quieter.

“A week later, that poor woman was found hanging.”

“The one who found her… was that same little boy.”

Nattawat draws in a deep breath, and instantly he’s dragged back to the day he found the only family he had left lying dead on the bathroom floor. The memory alone sends a shiver racing

through his body. He feels an ache of pity for that small, terrified child, because he knows exactly what it means to witness something like that with your own eyes. It's horrifying. The kind of thing that never fades from your mind. Not even your worst enemy deserves a memory like that.

"So she killed herself?" he asks carefully.

"Officially, yes."

"And in reality?"

"That man killed her," Lim replies. "He was afraid that dirty secret might one day come to light through her. As for the child, he simply took him away. Apparently the boy's grandmother searched for him until the day she died, but that bastard had enough influence to make sure she never saw him again. And the life that child ended up living… it turned into a real nightmare."

"That's a very sad story, really," Nattawat says slowly. "But to be honest, I don't understand what it has to do with me."

"The younger sister Abigail had," Lim says quietly, "was named Esther."

"Esther?" the young man whispers, barely audible, throwing him a frightened look.

"Esther Osman," Damian nods, his brows knitting slightly. "Your mother."

"But… damn," Nattawat exhales, covering his mouth with his hand.

He stares at the man across from him, stunned, trying to process what he just heard. So that means… he has a cousin? His aunt Abigail had a son, and that man would be about thirty now.

Unbelievable.

He knew from his mother's stories that she had a sister. But she'd always said that woman had died long ago. Nattawat had only ever seen her briefly in a few old photographs. The subject had never been discussed in detail, Esther clearly hated talking about it. Now he finally understood why.

They had both been connected to the same man.

One sister hated him.

The other loved him far too much.

And that single fact might have been the lever that eventually shattered Esther's sanity.

His mother had started drinking while she was still married to his father. A few months before the divorce, her condition had noticeably worsened, and that was when the arguments

began. Maybe that was when she found something out. Everything seemed to fit together now.

“She mentioned once that her sister had died a long time ago, but I never asked questions,” Nattawat says quietly. “When I lived with my grandmother in Georgia, nobody ever talked about it either. I was just a kid when she passed away too. But how do you even know all this?”

“You probably won’t like the answer,” Lim says with a faint, crooked smile, raising a dark eyebrow.

“Just say it. I want to hear it. You can’t possibly know these things for no reason. Where did you learn all this?”

“From Abigail’s child,” the man replies, rubbing the back of his neck as if it aches.

Nattawat studies him for a few seconds.

Then realization flickers across his face.

He quickly does the math in his head. Damian’s age fits perfectly within the timeline. Which means he could actually be Abigail’s son.

Otherwise, why would he dig so deeply into this story?

Suddenly Nattawat understands why the man’s face had seemed strangely familiar the moment he saw him. There are traces of the same grandmother Nattawat once lived with—blue eyes, dimples when he smiles, the deep lines beside his mouth when he laughs.

Holy shit.

“No,” Nattawat murmurs, shaking his head slowly. “No. Wait. No.”

“Yes,” Damian nods, letting out a breath as if he’s been waiting for this moment. “It’s me. I was pretty shocked too when I recognized Esther and my mother in your face. You resemble her in certain ways—the softness in your eyes, the way you carry yourself, even some of your habits. I didn’t see her often, but I remember enough. Night doesn’t look as much like her. He takes after his father.”

“Are you seriously telling me we share the same blood?” Nattawat asks. “Is that why you’ve been acting so strangely toward me? Or do you just have some kind of agenda?”

“Strangely?” Lim scoffs in surprise. “I wanted to help you before you got dragged into all this shit. That was after I realized we were connected by blood. But I couldn’t stop it. Some things are beyond even my control.”

“But why would you care?” Nattawat says bitterly. “Despite all this, we’re nothing to each other. Why are you only worrying about me now? Where were you before, when I needed help? When Night needed protection?” He shakes his head in disappointment. “Don’t try to play the good guy now. You’re not one.”

“I needed protection myself,” Damian replies quietly. “I knew I had brothers, technically. But I was forbidden from ever going near you. I only dared to take the risk after that accidental meeting in the casino. After that, I started looking into you—your life, your past—because…” He pauses, taking a slow breath. “I don’t know. Maybe because we’re similar.”

“I’m nothing like you,” Nattawat snaps. “Don’t compare us. Just because our mothers were sisters doesn’t make me—” He cuts himself off. “Whatever. What kind of relationship is this anyway? We’re strangers.”

“You’re wrong,” Damian says calmly. “This story goes back many years. I only started digging into it recently. Before that, honestly, I didn’t care. Not until I saw you. My father hid most of the truth about our family from me my entire life, including how my mother died. I never even imagined how I was born. Finding the truth wasn’t easy. Most of the trails had been erased. There was very little information. But I managed to uncover almost everything. He trusts me. That helped.”

“You’re that child… God,” Nattawat mutters, running his hands through his hair. “I can’t believe it.”

“Yeah,” Damian says quietly, grimacing. “It’s a shitty thing, being the monstrous result of a sexual assault against a defenseless woman. At first, no one even believed her. If you knew the names they called her… and me along with her. Back then I didn’t understand why they humiliated her so much. My existence is a mistake. But despite everything, my mother kept me. And he took her away from me because he was afraid of the consequences. A single DNA test could have destroyed him, his reputation was already powerful by then. If Abigail had gone to journalists, they would have torn him apart. But she was afraid. Everyone is afraid of him. Almost everyone.”

“This is insane,” Nattawat says, staring at him. “I don’t believe it. You can’t be my brother. How is that even possible?”

“You have no idea how much I can be,” Lim replies, sliding a folder across the table. “And this isn’t even the end of the story.”

Nattawat hesitates before opening it.

The first thing he sees is a dossier labeled **Abigail Osman.**

Then another.

Esther Osman.

The resemblance between the sisters is striking. One is older, simpler in appearance, but unmistakably similar. Nattawat remembers that before addiction took hold of her, his mother had been beautiful. Always well-groomed, effortlessly attractive. Even when she was married, men still chased after her. She had a natural kind of beauty.

But behind that beautiful façade had been a broken soul.

As he reads the report, Nattawat begins to understand how completely that man had destroyed her. Therapy sessions. Antidepressants. Alcohol. Her life had been tangled in endless complications because of her love for him.

She loved him.

Truly loved him.

So much that she refused to believe the truth, that the man she adored had raped her own sister.

But after Abigail's death, something must have shifted inside Esther. Slowly, painfully, she began to doubt. Step by step she started to realize that Abigail had been telling the truth all along.

And then something happened, some external shock that shattered her completely.

"Her doubts about my mother's story finally disappeared after many years," Damian says quietly, leaning back in his chair. "By then she was already married to him. In a way, I understand why Esther eventually lost her mind and drank herself into ruin. Guilt can destroy a person."

He pauses.

"Just imagine what it's like to realize the truth about your own life. That the man you loved was a monster. That he ruined your life. That you had children with him. That you're married to the man who raped and murdered your own sister. That he took your son away and you can't do anything about it. That somewhere out there he's hiding your nephew from the world. And that all of it could have been prevented… if you'd only believed Abigail years ago."

Each word hits Nattawat like a physical blow.

He squeezes his eyes shut.

Because Damian isn't just talking about his mother.

The "bastard" he keeps referring to is someone they both know very well.

"Wait…" Nattawat whispers hoarsely. "No."

"Yes," Damian says, regret in his eyes. "You understood correctly."

"Nut is your father?"

"Unfortunately. When I was a kid, my wish was to find my father. I wish I'd never learned who he was."

"My God," Nattawat breathes.

Everything clicks into place like a puzzle.

His mother's strange behavior before her death. The drinking. The fear that never had a clear explanation.

She was afraid of him.

But she kept fighting him anyway.

Even when she was still his wife, Nut beat her and crushed her emotionally. Esther had already seen his darker side long before their divorce. She knew exactly what he was capable of once she became useless to him.

Her entire life had been a war against that man.

She fought for justice for her sister. For freedom for her children. She even turned against him, using the only leverage she had.

She probably wanted to take Night away from him.

But he destroyed her first.

Damian remains silent, giving Nattawat time to absorb everything. Meanwhile Nattawat feels like he's falling out of reality. The ground disappears beneath his feet as he realizes that Lim is not only his cousin—

He's his brother.

By their mothers, they were already family.

By their father… they share the closest possible blood.

How could Nut have hidden something like this for so many years?

The hypocrisy is staggering.

And now Nattawat understands why his mother had been blackmailing him. She must have learned the entire truth about the child and the assault. Of course Nut paid her to stay quiet, his reputation meant everything to him.

He had never been thrilled about Nattawat and Night being born in the first place.

And then there was another son.

Did he hate all three of them?

Two of them he had no choice but to acknowledge. His ex-wife had discovered his young mistress, forcing him to play the role of father to protect his public image.

But Damian was different.

Nut hid him away.

Kept him secret.

As if the boy were a stain of shame.

Or maybe… he protected him because Damian was the son of the woman he truly loved.

The thought is maddening.

God, how disgusting.

He used all of them, even Esther, just to preserve his powerful reputation, while secretly keeping a child hidden from the world like some dangerous animal.

That bastard.

And his mother knew.

She must have learned the truth before the divorce and tried to find Damian. She blackmailed her ex-husband, demanding answers.

Eventually he got tired of it.

Nut had always despised her.

“He killed her, didn’t he?” Nattawat asks quietly, staring at the photo of his mother. “I was right. It makes sense. Conflict. Blackmail. That’s how it always ends with powerful men. He hated her that much.”

“Yes,” Damian nods. “You were right.”

“The only explanation for that hatred is that he never loved her. At the beginning of their relationship she was crazy about him. I told you already, love is destructive. It’s what killed your mother.”

He sighs.

“To my father, Esther was just a replacement for Abigail. The only woman he ever truly loved rejected him, and Esther looked like her. Seeing her again probably drove him insane. That’s why he kept your mother around for so long. Played with her. But eventually he realized they were different. The younger sister had a fighting spirit. You got that from her.”

“He killed them both,” Nattawat whispers, struggling to breathe. “Two sisters. Just because they got in his way? One because she could have destroyed him… and the other because she learned the truth. No wonder he hates his own children. All we bring him is trouble.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Damian nods. “I’m not entirely sure how your mother found proof of everything, but I have a theory. You’re probably wondering where the money from the blackmail went.”

Nattawat looks up sharply.

“I didn’t know until recently either,” Damian continues. “I looked into her financial records. She was transferring all of that money into a bank account… in my name.”

“Why?”

“I think it was her way of trying to atone. Maybe for what happened to my mother. Maybe for not believing her. I can’t be certain. But the guilt was clearly destroying her, mentally and physically. Or maybe she planned to apologize to me someday, once she found me. I don’t know, Nattawat. No one can tell us now.”

“But how did she learn the truth?” Nattawat asks. “Your mother was already dead. There weren’t any witnesses left. According to these documents, there was never even a trial. Her death was ruled a suicide, and the rape case never moved forward.”

“Page fifteen,” Damian says, resting his chin on his fingers. “That’s my main theory.”

He meets Nattawat’s gaze.

“And it also explains why someone is trying to kill your boyfriend during this race.”

Nattawat flips through the folder, searching for the numbers printed in the upper right corner. As he studies the data, his expression changes rapidly, realization dawning on him with every line he reads. Lim watches him calmly. He understands perfectly well what kind of storm must be raging inside him right now, because Nattawat is beginning to grasp the full scale of what is happening around them and how deeply everything is connected.

“It’s Norawit’s father,” Lim says quietly. “We both know he was killed because of some important piece of compromising information. Most likely he passed something crucial directly into Esther’s hands before he died. He was the only one who had something that truly frightened our father. I think he was afraid that the truth about my relationship to him would come out, and possibly information about his shadow operations as well. The older I got, the more dangerous that became. That’s exactly why I was kept on such a tight leash my entire life. He taught me to keep the nature of our relationship a secret. My company kept growing, and my influence in this city kept strengthening. Just imagine what will happen to him if people find out I’m his son. One thread will pull another, and all his filth will come spilling out, including every murder he’s committed.”

“Abigail, Mom, Norawit’s parents, Pond…”

“And many more people,” the man nods.

“So he really is Hwang?” Nattawat whispers with difficulty, his gaze dropping to the floor.

“Yes. He is.”

“My God… my father is a criminal. A murderer. A rapist. A monster,” Nattawat says under his breath, choking on the pain clawing at his chest.

“Do you want to stop here?” Lim asks carefully, noticing how shaken he is.

Nattawat shakes his head and draws in several deep breaths.

“All right,” Damian says uncertainly, never taking his eyes off him. “His birth name is Nuthwang. When he came to the United States, he split it in two to make it easier to maintain his double life. Nut Jirochtikul is a respected city judge with a flawless reputation, an honored citizen. And Hwang… Hwang is a beast who founded a powerful criminal organization. If you want my opinion, I think he has severe psychological problems, possibly even dissociative identity issues. For years he managed to sit in two chairs at once so perfectly that he strengthened his power on both sides. In the ordinary world he’s influential as a representative of the law, but in the criminal world he’s even more dangerous.”

“You’re telling me he killed all those people, including the parents of the Titicharoenrak twins, and just stayed free? How is that even possible in this damned world?” Nattawat shouts, throwing the documents to the floor. He begins pacing back and forth, dragging his fingers through his hair. “How? God, how?! How does the earth even carry someone like him? How have you been talking to him all this time? You knew who he was, what he was! Maybe not everything, but you knew!”

“I’m afraid of him,” Lim says quietly, lowering his eyes. “The only reason I’m here is you. Do you know why? Night is afraid of him. I’m afraid of him. You’re the only one who isn’t, because he has no real influence over you. You were right about me. Deep down, I’m a coward.”

Nattawat drags his hands over his face and lets out a long, angry groan.

“I thought you were the worst thing that could happen to this world… but him… damn it. Why is he like this? I… I just don’t understand. Where does so much cruelty and indifference come from?” he says, staring at Lim as if trying to find answers in his cold eyes.

“I don’t know what to tell you. The only thing I know is that he has what you might call ‘killer genes.’”

“Killer genes?” Nattawat frowns in confusion.

“That doesn’t excuse him in any way,” Lim says, “but it explains certain aspects of his behavior. Aggression, brutality, impulsiveness, a love of violence, and satisfaction from causing pain to others. I once had the chance to analyze his blood. It contains variants of the CDH13 gene and the so-called ‘warrior gene,’ MAOA.”

“Can you speak like a normal human being? What does that even mean?”

“CDH13 is responsible for the development of connections between neurons in the brain. It plays a major role in disorders like ADHD. The MAOA gene affects the production of neurotransmitters like dopamine. When combined with external triggers—alcohol, drugs, things like that—they can provoke explosive hormonal surges of aggression. Hwang carries both variants. People with this combination are thirteen times more likely to commit serious violent crimes. He’s a walking catastrophe.”

“My God…” Nattawat exhales, shaking his head.

“Again, it doesn’t justify anything he’s done,” Lim says. “But it helps explain his motivation. Or rather, the absence of one. That’s simply the kind of person he is. A born bastard. The MAOA gene is also associated with higher crime rates when the person experienced physical or psychological abuse as a child. You might not know this, but Hwang had a difficult childhood. That probably pushed him further toward cruelty.” Lim pauses, frowning thoughtfully. “Although I doubt that’s the whole story.”

“I doubt it too,” Nattawat replies. “My childhood wasn’t exactly easy either, but I didn’t turn out like him. I understand it influences who you become, but there’s always a choice: to be good or to be cruel.”

“A lot depends on our ability to understand the consequences of our actions and control our behavior,” Lim says slowly. “You’re strong. You know how to survive in this world. You’re capable of compassion. You’re a hero. But not everyone can become that. Some people are naturally inclined to care for others, to create, to heal with their warmth. And others are born destroyers. They either cannot resist the impulse to kill, or violence in any form gives them pleasure. They crave more and more of it. They revel in the suffering of the weak. Death and pain excite them. He’s a predator. That’s what separates you from me, and from Hwang.”

He pauses, his gaze distant.

“Why do people kill? Why am I the way I am? Why don’t I care about human lives… even my own? I don’t know. But there are always roots to everything. Maybe our father was simply born insane. Or maybe something made him that way. We’ll probably never know what.”

He’s right. Those questions will never have clear answers.

And now, knowing that Damian grew up in even worse conditions than he did, right beside a man with the full set of “natural killer” traits and an endless thirst for violence, Nattawat begins to understand, at least a little, why Damian became so inhuman. Nuthwang is a moral and physical sadist. How could anyone grow up normal next to someone like that?

“When he took you from Georgia… what happened then?” Nattawat asks, lifting his eyes to him.

“He gave me a new name and a new surname so no one could find me. Then he raised me himself. You know perfectly well what that means. Pain became as ordinary to me as washing my face in the morning. It was simply my way of life. It changed me… shaped me. His threats don’t surprise me anymore, but my body still tenses automatically when he’s nearby. Those fears run deep.”

“He probably treated you even worse than Night. He beat him too, but he had to be careful not to leave marks in visible places.”

“With me, Hwang never bothered with caution,” Lim says calmly. “He didn’t live in the same house, but he visited often. I grew up practically locked in one room. I studied remotely.

Guards watched me constantly. I had everything—except freedom and human contact. I lived like a hermit in a golden cage until he finally let me out. There was nothing to do except study. I explored the world through knowledge. Expanded the limits of my intellect. It turned out I'm frighteningly intelligent," he adds with a faint smirk before sighing.

"Maybe that's when he realized he could use me, turn my mind into his property. I was never a son to him. Never a friend. Never even a true business partner. Just a tool. He invested heavily in my education, and I devoured knowledge like vitamins. My success was unbelievable. My IQ seemed to climb right before his eyes. I built my first invention when I was only ten. That same year I negotiated my first deal, selling it to one of his friends."

"Hwang isn't stupid. He quickly saw my potential and began preparing me to found Lim Industries. He invested in the company, but I was the one who truly built it into something powerful. And once that happened, he dragged me into producing weapons for terrorists. My mind, my productivity, my ability to negotiate deals, they became the source of his enormous profits."

He pauses.

"But at some point, something changed. I started to feel… independent."

"Why?" Nattawat asks.

"I don't know. It's strange. I just stopped feeling his control so strongly, as if the tight leash around my neck had loosened for the first time in years. He allowed me to build Limhouse and live there separately from him. I handled business entirely on my own, developed unique weapons, sold them for millions without his involvement. For the first time, I felt important."

He looks ahead thoughtfully.

"People in the city knew me. My face was on television. I gave interviews. They called me a young prodigy. They admired me. And the best part? None of it had anything to do with him. The name Damian Lim was something I built myself—with my own mind."

"I stopped fearing his threats. I didn't flinch at the idea of violence anymore. I even allowed myself to talk back to him sometimes. I became… bold."

"But you're still afraid of him."

"No matter how strong and cold I appear on the outside, inside I'm terrified of him," Lim says quietly. "That will never be fixed. Hwang broke me too deeply. I'm beyond repair, just like he is. He raised me to be no better than himself. I'm not looking for excuses. I'm just as much of a bastard."

"You said you weren't allowed to approach us," Nattawat says. "Why?"

"He didn't want me to ever cross paths with you. Hwang always kept the boundaries between Nut's life and Hwang's life very clear. You and Night are the children of a respectable citizen with a tragic story. In some ways you're also just part of his image. You help him maintain

the reputation of a devoted single father. According to the story, he saved you from an alcoholic mother. But I… I'm a link in Hwang's chain of power. I belong to a different world. And even there, I'm not his son."

"Just a resource," Nattawat says quietly, frowning with sympathy. "If you're so afraid of him, why tell me all this? There could be consequences if he finds out."

"What could be worse than your father sending you to certain death?" Damian asks, raising an eyebrow. "You didn't end up in Powerslide by accident."

"Don't tell me this whole race was his idea, not yours," Nattawat says with a nervous laugh.

"I won't," Lim shrugs.

"He knows I'm there? That I could die?"

"He personally ordered that your name be added to the list of participants. Right now he's making money off you, just like everyone else."

"I can't believe this… but I'm his… we're… I mean…"

"His son," Lim finishes for him. "Yes. But not in this case. Right now you're an obstacle. You showed him you stand on the side of his enemy. That automatically makes you his opponent. He doesn't care. You couldn't have entered this race before because he wouldn't allow it. But your connection with Titicharoenrak changed that."

"I talked to him about all of this on the day of the selection," Nattawat says bitterly. "He understood everything, and laughed at me."

"Hwang holds nothing sacred. That's why I'm here. Your boyfriend has been ordered to be killed during the race. And you're supposed to finish it as the winner."

"God!" Nattawat exclaims, dragging his hands over his face. "My head is splitting from all of this. I don't understand anything anymore. He's obsessed—with cruelty, with murder, with money and power! He doesn't care about anything, not even about us! He's willing to destroy his own children for his goals. I thought you were the madman behind this race, but…"

"I'm just the executor. If I refuse, I wouldn't be surprised if I ended up in prison, or dead. You've only just collided with Hwang's world. I've known every side of him my entire life."

"Then stop this. Stop the race and the pointless deaths, you can do it, can't you? You handle all the technical aspects, right?" Nattawat says, stepping closer with his arms crossed. "Take this damn device out of us. If it's not about North's debt, what's the point of all this?"

"He wants the Titicharoenrak brothers dead. I can't help you. The device really can't be removed without shutting it down first. And disabling it without him noticing would be extremely difficult. If anything goes wrong, he'll know immediately."

"Then stop the race. Sabotage it. Anything. We have to end this. We have to save Norawit. People are dying for nothing. How can you watch this calmly? He has to answer for it!"

“It’s not that simple,” Lim replies. “Unfortunately, I don’t build faulty inventions. In this case, that’s the problem. The system can’t just be switched off. There’s a whole sequence of actions required, and it can’t be done at any time. The devices inside you are tightly connected to the race’s control system. To deactivate the system entirely, all active transmitters must be within the same radius near the main control center. And even then, to shut everything down without killing the carriers, two control blocks have to be destroyed. They’re located on the Powerslide track.”

“On the track… so theoretically we could only disable the system during the third stage, the final race?” Nattawat asks, thinking intensely.

“Theoretically. In practice it’s far more complicated. The system is heavily protected. Your hacker friend won’t be able to help you here. This isn’t some train you can break into. The main console is designed so only I can shut it down, and once one control unit is destroyed, the second must be disabled within seconds. It’s practically impossible. That’s the whole point. The race exists as long as he wants it to.”

“But you created all this. Can’t you reprogram it somehow?”

“There’s no way,” Damian says.

“Then why did you tell me all this? Why come here? Why reveal everything?” Nattawat demands.

“Pride stands on arrogance, arrogance stands on insignificance, and insignificance stands on self-pity. I don’t want to pity myself, so I’m stepping on my pride,” Damian says quietly. “I admit you’re stronger than me. In this situation I’m powerless, but you’re not. You’re the only one who isn’t afraid of him. And you have a reason: you want to save Norawit. He’s not guilty of wanting the truth, yet they want to kill him for it. I wanted you to know everything. You need the advantage. He must not realize that you know. But be careful, he’s watching every step you and Norawit take.”

“What can I possibly do?” Nattawat spreads his arms helplessly. “You’re the genius. You’re the inventor. You’re in his inner circle. What can I do? I don’t even fully understand how to destroy the system and survive! How do I stop all of this? You’re the brain here, so think of something!”

“You want to stop the race?” Damian says quietly. “Then destroy Hwang.”

“I don’t even know how. Our hands are tied. Everything around him is bought and paid for. What am I supposed to do? Even this system can’t be destroyed easily. How do I stop it when I’m in danger too?” Nattawat asks, almost pleading.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry, Nattawat. But I can’t save you,” Lim replies.

“What the hell is this piece of trash doing here?” Norawit’s irritated voice suddenly sounds from the doorway.

Nattawat flinches and turns sharply toward him.

He looks Norawit over anxiously, and his heart tightens with a terrible premonition. Norawit looks as if fate itself has just beaten him down. Dark circles shadow his eyes, and the life that once shone in his beautiful brown irises is gone. Only unbearable pain remains on his face. He's soaked through from the rain, wet hair pushed back, drops of water running down his skin.

He studies Nattawat for a long moment before slowly clenching his fists and shifting his furious gaze to Damian. Nattawat understands perfectly how this must look from the outside. In his own home stands the man who has helped destroy Norawit's life, though there is still so much Norawit doesn't know. And soon, he will learn something even more important.

Nattawat crosses the room in three long strides and cups Norawit's cheeks with warm hands. The moment he touches him, he feels how badly he's trembling. Is it from the cold? Or from the anger burning deep inside those dark eyes?

Something is wrong.

In that darkness, Nattawat catches something he cannot explain, and suddenly he feels the urge to pull his hands away. As if guilt pierces him from somewhere deep inside. As if he doesn't deserve to touch him right now, knowing what people of his own blood have done to him.

"Where were you? I was worried. Who disappears like that? Why weren't you answering me?" Nattawat asks quietly, his voice soft.

"I was busy," Norawit replies shortly, his eyes never leaving Lim. "What is he doing here?"

"He…"

"I'm already leaving. I think the two of you need to talk," the man interrupts, rising smoothly from the armchair and adjusting his jacket with calm elegance.

"What is he doing here?" Norawit repeats, his voice sharp with anger as he turns to his boyfriend, separating every word.

"I'll explain everything. Please don't be angry. I let him in because we needed to talk."

"Get the hell out of here before I kill you," Norawit says to the guest, though his eyes remain fixed on Nattawat.

For a few seconds, Damian studies Norawit's profile with a perceptive look. Then he lets out a short, thoughtful chuckle and turns away. He knows Norawit isn't joking. If he truly wanted to, he would kill him. The boy can be incredibly dangerous, especially when it comes to the people he cares about.

The problem is that Norawit has no idea how useful his enemy might actually be in this situation.

They could join forces against the real villain, if Norawit were willing to be a little wiser and more merciful. Killing him would serve absolutely no purpose. And once Nattawat tells him

the whole truth from beginning to end, he will understand that.

Lim doesn't respond. He simply leaves the apartment, silently giving them privacy.

Nattawat wraps his arms around Norawit's shoulders and presses his body against him, trying to give him as much warmth as possible.

Norawit stands completely still.

His arms hang at his sides, and an unpleasant shiver runs through his body. He tries not to think about the fact that Nattawat's father killed his parents.

But he can't.

It's stronger than he is.

The deepest wound in his heart has been torn open again.

He squeezes his eyes shut, but it doesn't help. Images from that night flood his mind once more. His parents' bodies. Blood. Screams. Pleas for mercy.

God, it's unbearable.

"No… I can't," he whispers faintly.

"You're freezing," Nattawat murmurs, gently stroking his hair and burying his nose in Norawit's neck. "You're so cold."

He doesn't even know what he means, Norawit's rain-soaked skin from outside, or the distant way he's acting now. But he knows something is wrong.

Norawit has never pushed him away before. In fact, throughout most of their relationship, Norawit had always been the one to initiate everything. The hugs, the kisses, the dates, the meetings, the sex. Everything.

Their relationship had been born from Norawit's desire, from his feelings. He had chased Nattawat's affection, trying to earn the same love in return.

Now their roles had reversed.

Nattawat clings to him, but receives nothing back.

Something has changed.

He has the unbearable feeling that Norawit no longer wants any of this. He doesn't know why, but without a single word being spoken, he understands that in this moment he is no longer needed.

The cold coming from Norawit feels so absolute that something inside Nattawat begins to crumble.

“Please… hug me,” Nattawat says, his voice trembling. “Hug me. I’m begging you.”

“Nattawat…” Norawit says hoarsely, as if trying to stop him.

“Hug me. I want to be someone you still need for at least one more second before I let you go. Maybe this is the last time I’ll ever hold you, because there’s something I have to tell you. Please. Just once. Baby… I’m begging you. I need it.”

Nattawat closes his eyes and inhales deeply, breathing in the most beautiful scent in the world.

Ripe watermelon mixed with rain and cigarette smoke.

It’s Norawit.

He has always smelled like this.

Those bittersweet notes usually stir something warm low in Nattawat’s stomach, but now it’s different. Now he wants to memorize them, absorb them into every cell of his body.

Because he feels like he is saying goodbye.

Slowly, Norawit’s hands rise and slide around Nattawat’s waist, pulling him into a tight embrace. Nattawat hears the frantic pounding of the wounded heart in Norawit’s chest.

Then a terrible sound escapes Norawit’s lips.

A sob.

His body begins to tremble weakly, and he clings to Nattawat even tighter, as if holding him for the very last time.

“I hate myself,” Norawit whispers, brushing his lips against Nattawat’s cheek. “I hate myself so much for not being able to accept this. Nattawat… I don’t want to break your heart.”

Something twists painfully inside Nattawat.

He knows.

Norawit knows that Nut killed his family. That must be why he’s saying these things now.

God… that’s why he’s so cold.

It’s terrifying to imagine what’s happening inside his heart.

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I’m trying, but I can’t,” Norawit says brokenly, gripping the fabric of Nattawat’s shirt on his back. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to erase this from my head. I need to tell you—”

“My father killed them,” Nattawat says quietly, struggling to breathe.

Norawit jerks away from him as if burned by the touch and stares at him in shock. Nattawat can see it clearly in his eyes, the moment Norawit's world begins to collapse.

It hurts to see him like this.

But it's the truth.

And there's no hiding from it anymore.

They can never pretend that nothing happened.

Nattawat understands how he must feel right now. He probably wouldn't be able to accept it either, not so suddenly. It's a long and painful battle with yourself.

Fate has placed Norawit in front of a terrible choice.

But no matter how much Nattawat loves him, he will never beg him to stay. That would be selfish.

Even though his life is falling apart in this very moment, he refuses to hold him back.

Norawit has to decide for himself whether he can live with this truth while staying by his side.

Maybe it will take years.

Maybe a lifetime.

It all depends on the strength of his feelings.

And even Norawit himself doesn't know which side the scales will tip toward.

No one can answer that question.

Right now, all Nattawat can see is how Norawit's soul is being torn apart between love and truth.

It's the worst thing he has ever witnessed.

Watching the suffering written across the face of the person you love hurts more than any bullet.

It is hell.

A real, living hell, seeing their pain and knowing you cannot fix it.

Worse than that… knowing you are the reason for it.

"I'm sorry," Nattawat whispers, his face tightening with pain. "Please forgive me. I'm so sorry, Norawit. I can't even imagine what you're feeling right now. But I'm so sorry. I don't even know how someone could ever make up for something like this."

“It wasn’t you,” Norawit replies quietly. “You shouldn’t feel guilty.”

“But I do. Right now I feel like I’m the one who killed them. Like I’m the one killing you.”

“Did you know?” Norawit asks with a trembling voice. “Please tell me you didn’t know all this when I was falling in love with you. I wouldn’t survive that.”

“I didn’t know. Damian just explained everything to me,” Nattawat answers.

“Damian,” Norawit repeats bitterly with a small, mocking laugh. “Another bastard. Because of him my life is full of nothing but trouble.”

“I’m sorry. All your problems are because of my family,” Nattawat whispers as he slowly sinks to the floor, unable to remain standing. “I’m sorry. Forgive me for him too. Forgive me for everything.”

“What are you talking about?” Norawit asks, confused.

“My father killed your parents… and Pond. And Lim dragged you into all of this because he’s under my father’s influence.” Nattawat pushes the folder Damian brought toward him. “He’s my brother.”

“The child… and the test… damn it,” Norawit murmurs as realization dawns on him. “So that’s who Hwang found in Georgia.”

“We have the same father. Our mothers were sisters,” Nattawat says, lifting tear-filled eyes to him. “My entire family has been destroying yours for years.”

His voice breaks.

“You should never have loved me.”

“We both shouldn’t have,” Norawit whispers, swallowing hard. “I’m sorry, bab— Nattawat. I just don’t understand how I… if I can… You’re not guilty, but… how can we… I see it all and… I can’t…”

His breathing becomes uneven as he tries to put his thoughts into words, but nothing comes out properly. He stammers, then falls silent.

Slowly he slides down the wall until he’s sitting on the floor, staring blankly ahead.

His mind begins connecting one piece of the story to another, forming a long and terrifying chain of events.

Everything is connected.

Too connected.

They sit in heavy silence for so long that they lose track of time.

Both of them are shattered in their own way.

For each of them, this is a wound that cuts unbearably deep.

Two hearts that love each other now have no idea how to move forward after the truth has been revealed.

Norawit doesn't blame Nattawat for everything, but deep down Nattawat feels a crushing guilt for his family.

He can't even look at him.

He can practically feel Norawit's pain in the air.

Norawit needs time.

Right now he isn't capable of making decisions or being alone.

He needs someone strong and close beside him. Someone who will let him be weak. Someone who will pull him into their arms and let him cry out every ounce of pain inside him.

But Nattawat cannot be that person now.

Taking a deep breath, Nattawat pulls his phone from his back pocket. With trembling fingers, he types a short message.

Norawit's apartment. Right now. It's urgent. He needs help.

He sends it to Phuwin.

Phuwin is Norawit's best friend. There's no one else to ask. North still knows nothing.

Nattawat rises slowly to his feet and wipes his damp cheeks with his palm. Finally he glances at Norawit.

Norawit is curled into himself against the wall, staring at a single point without blinking.

It reminds Nattawat of that terrible night in Ojai, when they all nearly died.

Norawit wraps his arms around his knees, barely holding back his tears. His fingers dig into his own skin until his knuckles turn white.

Nattawat feels his heart breaking in his chest at the sight.

It cracks so loudly it feels as if it's splitting apart.

But he cannot touch him.

Not now.

Because he is the reason Norawit is hurting.

The realization that everything is tied together with threads that cannot be cut is destroying him. Blood ties cannot simply be erased from life.

And the one thing that has kept him alive all this time, his feelings for Nattawat, is now making everything hurt even more.

Maybe this is how love breaks.

Or how love breaks people.

Nattawat exhales quietly, picks up his hoodie, and leaves the apartment without a sound.

He knows he has to leave Norawit alone, no matter how much it hurts.

It's the only thing he can do.

The moment the door closes behind him, a scream of pure pain echoes from inside.

Nattawat freezes for just a second, squeezing his eyes shut.

But he doesn't go back.

Inside the apartment, Norawit finally lets go.

The pain tearing him apart bursts out in a desperate, heart-wrenching cry so loud it feels as if the walls themselves might tremble.

And it pours out of him in bitter tears… while Nattawat walks farther and farther away.

A week later…

A heavy blow to the jaw makes everything go black for a few seconds. You'd think he would be used to that feeling by now, but every time it happens his balance still falters, and his mind slips out of his body for a moment.

North staggers back on exhausted legs and quickly shakes his head, trying to chase away the darkness in front of his eyes. Everything around him looks like sunspots: blurred shapes pressed up against the fence and one large silhouette only a few steps away. He takes several deep breaths and squeezes his eyes shut again.

Loud music and shouting erupt from every side. The crowd howls for him to destroy his opponent. The air reeks of blood, beer, and the nauseating smoke of cheap cigarettes. The

entire scene fits perfectly with what anyone imagines when they think of underground fights. Completely illegal. Completely filthy.

Adrenaline boils wildly in his veins, but if he's honest, it makes him sick now.

There was a time when he came here willingly, thrilled by his victories. He earned money this way and, for once, felt successful at something. But that thrill no longer brought him any joy. Now it only crushed him.

Because the one hobby he once loved had turned into a relentless job, and if he stopped, he would be killed.

Everything around him blends into a single roaring hum inside his head. Voices merge into a disgusting noise that seems to split his skull open. His ears are already ringing from the blows he's taken, and the chaos only makes it worse. He might have another mild concussion. Nausea twists his stomach, and overall he feels like hell.

His opponent is already worn down by the fight. This match has dragged on far longer than usual. The guy across from him is much stronger than most. He looks like a massive rock, like some damn version of Dwayne Johnson. A full head taller than North, muscles thick and sculpted, and incredibly resilient.

It took everything North had to push him to this point of exhaustion.

The fight has drained nearly all of his strength, but it isn't over yet. Titicharoenrak is barely holding himself upright. His breathing is ragged, his legs tremble, but his arms and feet still move on pure instinct. One of his eyes is swelling shut from a painful bruise. By morning a deep purple mark will spread beneath it and along his cheekbone, and the white of his eye will turn red from burst blood vessels.

He knows the signs well.

This has become his normal life.

The fights follow the same brutal rhythm. They used to happen less often, but now they're scheduled almost every three or four days. He barely has time to recover before stepping into the ring again, already weakened. But he has no choice.

As long as he keeps fighting, at least Norawit should stay safe from punishment for his disobedience.

He takes plenty of hits during these matches, then spends days licking his wounds, both physical and mental. If the injuries are serious, they sometimes give him extra time to recover. But that doesn't happen often. His task is simple: earn money to pay off the debt.

North wipes his fist under his nose, smearing away the heavy flow, and spits a mixture of thick saliva and blood onto the floor. The white bandages wrapped around his hands before every fight are now stained a dirty crimson. They don't dull the pain in his bones when he strikes, but at least they keep his skin from splitting open.

Suddenly his opponent raises a hand and calls for a timeout. The harsh clang of the gong rings out, and the crowd groans in protest. They retreat to opposite corners for two minutes.

Someone immediately shoves a bottle of water into Titicharoenrak's hands. He drinks almost the entire thing in one gulp, his throat completely dry. He doesn't even look at the person who gave it to him, though he thanks them silently. It's probably someone whose name he doesn't even know.

Usually he's alone here. The only help he gets comes from random spectators.

His brother refuses to watch. Every punch North takes feels almost physical to him. And Night can't handle violence at all. It triggers painful memories from the past.

His friends avoid these places voluntarily. They prefer other ways to chase adrenaline, so none of them come to support him during fights.

He doesn't blame them.

He doubts he could watch something like this either if Norawit were the one standing in that cage. Seeing someone you love in pain is unbearable, especially when you're powerless to stop it.

Someone suddenly grabs his face by the chin and begins cleaning his fresh wounds. The boy closes his eyes wearily and leans back against the metal fence. His head spins. Every muscle in his body aches from exhaustion. His strength is nearly gone, but he has to go back out there.

If he doesn't, Damian will be furious.

And that always ends badly.

North hisses quietly when a cotton pad soaked in disinfectant touches his split lip. He's used to it by now. The sting has become familiar.

By the end of the final round his face is usually one massive bruise, but he never complains about things like that. They're nothing compared to the pain in his soul.

The two minutes pass quickly. The gong rings again.

Titicharoenrak steps back into the ring to keep fighting for the win.

He casts a cautious glance at his opponent's legs and raises his fists. That guy always takes a step forward before throwing a punch. It's a small habit, but it makes him predictable. North can tell where the strike will land and which hand it will come from.

That tiny flaw in his technique is the only reason North is still standing against such a giant.

For about ten seconds the opponent shifts from foot to foot, then finally steps forward and attacks.

North darts sideways, ducking sharply, but suddenly a knee slams into his ribs. A cry escapes him as sharp pain explodes through his side. For a second he thinks he even hears a faint crack.

But it's probably just a heavy bruise. If a rib were broken, he wouldn't even be able to breathe.

The pain lasts only a few seconds before his body adjusts.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees a fist flying toward his face. He reacts just in time, raising his arms to block the strike. Their punches are weaker now, but they still land cleanly.

North manages to grab hold of his opponent, catching him off guard. He jerks him forward and drives a punch into his face, probably knocking out a tooth.

The giant crashes onto the ring floor and lies there motionless for several seconds.

The referee begins counting the seconds he has to get up.

Titicharoenrak hates this part.

Every time he reaches this moment, he feels no better than the bastards who beat his defenseless mother while she begged for mercy.

To the crowd, it always looks thrilling. Spectacular.

But to him, it feels like a blade through the heart.

Finishing off someone who's already nearly defeated disgusts him. It feels like beating a helpless child who can't fight back. But a knockout is required to win.

He can't let the man get back to his feet.

The round is almost over. If his opponent gathers the strength to stand, they'll be forced into another round, and neither of them has the energy left for that.

So North makes the only decision he can.

He chooses the lesser evil.

He steps back and looks down at his opponent, then draws in a deep breath filled with regret.

The crowd shrieks like a pack of vicious hyenas hungry for blood and flesh. They look like it too, jumping behind the cage with burning eyes.

The only thing missing are the tongues hanging out of their mouths, dripping with anticipation for something brutal and ugly.

It's disgusting.

But he has no choice.

North twists his body, leaps forward, and drives a savage kick straight into the man's head.

The opponent collapses with a thunderous crash, unconscious.

North closes his eyes and lets his shoulders sag in exhaustion.

The referee doesn't even bother counting this time. The gong rings immediately, and someone raises his arm in the air.

Victory.

Another one added to his record.

But each win is harder than the last.

This time, he feels completely drained.

North never tells anyone, but the headaches haven't stopped since this nightmare began. He's almost certain he's suffered more than one serious concussion by now, and he has no intention of getting them treated.

Lately he's been taking more hits than before.

He knows every fight steals another piece of his health, and the rest he's given is never enough.

He's growing weaker.

And soon, he won't be able to fight at all.

While the spectators count their winnings and celebrate loudly, Titicharoenrak quietly leaves the ring, slipping away unnoticed. As usual after a fight, he spends a long time in the shower, trying not to think about anything at all. Most of the time he simply stares at the white tiles beneath his feet, watching the red water, tinted with blood, spiral down into the drain. It almost feels as if the pain flows away with it. At least the physical kind.

The hot streams of water loosen the tension in his neck and shoulders, washing the grime from his body—the grime he has buried himself in so deeply. This is the best part, not the victory itself. The moment when he closes the shower door behind him and stands alone under the cleansing water. Later, when he gets home, he will climb into a bathtub filled with ice and lie there until his body goes numb.

Night used to scold him for doing that. But one day he saw his body after a fight—bare, covered in bruises and swelling—and after that he never argued again. He simply stayed silent. He understood it was the only thing that eased the pain, because painkillers no longer helped him at all.

The cold keeps the bruises from blooming as badly as they could, and it eases the tension in his muscles. After completing this strange ritual, he will crawl into a clean bed where someone close to him will wrap him in their arms, and he will fall asleep as if he hadn't

destroyed himself all over again today. For a few hours he will feel like a normal person. Tomorrow will come soon enough.

Another miserable day, just like always. But this routine makes it easier to endure the withdrawal from drugs and alcohol. Pain drowns everything else out.

A perfect little Groundhog Day.

North runs his palms over his skin, washing away the last traces of blood, then shuts off the water. He steps out of the shower, wraps a thick towel around his hips, and walks toward the locker room to get dressed.

He stops abruptly in the doorway.

There is someone standing by the rows of lockers.

An unexpected guest.

He quickly composes himself and exhales in irritation. The room looks like a high school boys' locker room, so people wander through it all the time, but this man has never come here before. That alone feels strange. Suspicious. It stirs something unpleasant in North's chest.

Titicharoenrak walks to his locker, opens the door, and wipes the remaining water from his face. Even the lightest touch sends sharp pain through his bruised skin, but he doesn't react. He simply starts dressing slowly.

He doesn't need pity. Especially not from him.

All he wants is for this arrogant idiot to leave him alone. Unfortunately, that isn't possible.

"Good fight," Damian says, staring absently at the floor.

"As always," the young man replies indifferently, pulling jeans over his bare body.

"You're right, Cerberus. In the ring, you're always magnificent."

"North," he snorts with irritation.

"What?" the man asks, arching an arrogant eyebrow.

"My name is North."

"Ah, right. I keep forgetting. I don't bother remembering such trivial details, especially when the people attached to them are useless to me."

"Sometimes I get a strong urge to smash your face in," Titicharoenrak says, slamming the metal locker door beside him and glaring at Damian's profile. "Actually, wait. I meant always."

The corner of Damian's lips twitches into a faint half-smile as he slowly lifts his head.

Defiance clearly runs in the Titicharoenrak family. When Damian first met Norawit, the older brother had been sharp-tongued and reckless, and he had paid for it dearly, but even that hadn't broken him. His younger brother was exactly the same. Now North seemed calmer, but only because he was in danger. Even so, he always looked one step away from introducing his fist to Damian's jaw.

"What's stopping you?" Lim asks smugly.

"Your dogs. The ones who'd beat my insides to pulp and break every bone in my body afterward. I'd rather not die that stupidly."

"There's only you and me here," Damian replies, glancing briefly toward the upper corner of the room. "The cameras aren't recording. There's no security. Go ahead, if you want it that badly."

"Your generous offers usually smell like trouble," Titicharoenrak says with a skeptical laugh.

"Not this time," Damian answers calmly.

North studies him carefully—the perfect hair, the crisp white shirt, the composed profile. He exhales slowly.

The man's expensive cologne fills the air, probably worth a month's salary for an ordinary person in this city. Arrogance radiates from him, along with absolute self-confidence. On the outside he looks like a luxurious bastard. Inside—rot.

And yet he evokes conflicting feelings.

He's dangerous. And strangely magnetic.

There is a frightening depth in his eyes, something bottomless where countless dark demons must be hiding.

Power and intelligence radiate from him. The kind of presence that makes him seem a head taller than everyone else. An attractive villain, one who never leaves anyone indifferent. People either hate him or find themselves disturbingly intrigued.

Standing near him makes North feel small.

It's the same unpleasant feeling Night gives him. As if he simply doesn't deserve to stand anywhere near people like them. Both men carry the same energy—powerful, commanding personalities. Not similar in appearance, but in something deeper: cold restraint, intelligence, confidence, piercing gazes, and decisive character.

The only difference is that Jirochtikul isn't a monster.

Lim is.

That bastard cares about no one but himself.

“You’re a strange guy, Cerberus,” Damian says thoughtfully. “When I keep you on a tight leash, you struggle constantly. But the moment I loosen it, you calm down.”

“I’m the cause of my own problems,” Titicharoenrak replies evenly. “Sure, you’re a bastard, but my life isn’t miserable because of you.”

“Amazing,” Lim murmurs, shaking his head slightly. “I wasn’t wrong about you. A troubled kid with enormous potential. There’s so much determination and strength inside you. Do you even know how far you could go?”

“What do you mean?” North frowns.

“Are you a good person?” Damian suddenly asks, turning toward him.

“No.”

“Then a bad one?”

“Yes.”

“How does that show?”

“I bring nothing but trouble. My existence doesn’t benefit anyone. I just ruin everything.”

Suddenly Lim grabs his forearm without warning. His thumb slowly slides over scars hidden beneath tattoos, marks that can only be felt by touch. He studies North’s confused eyes as if searching for answers.

North feels oddly flustered. Damian’s behavior today is strange, too strange.

He wants to pull his arm away but hesitates, caught by the cold depth of those eyes.

“Your soul is scarred just like this, isn’t it?” Damian says quietly. “A wounded boy inside. A strong man outside. It’s hard living behind hundreds of masks. There’s a monstrous wound in you. And it keeps growing, spreading like an incurable virus. One day it will kill you.”

His voice is completely serious.

“Find the courage inside yourself. Grab your life by the throat and live here and now. You only have this moment. If you want your life to change, start with yourself. You think you’re useless because you do nothing. You’re used to your brother carrying the responsibility for you, but have you ever thought that one day his shoulders might break under the weight? What then? If you destroy him, then you’ll truly be a bad person. Right now, you’re not. You’re just broken.”

“You talk like you know exactly what that’s like,” North says, finally pulling his arm from Damian’s grip but not looking away.

“The easiest thing in the world is blaming others for your problems,” Damian replies quietly. “But it’s rarely that simple. You were right earlier. I am the cause of my own misery. The difference between us is that I was never a good person. My conscience is already stained with countless innocent lives I’ve ruined. I chose evil. You still haven’t chosen a side.”

North stares at him skeptically for a long moment before lowering his gaze.

Something about this man feels different today. He’s still the same bastard, but somehow more… human.

Could that even be possible?

Nothing had ever melted his stone heart before. Damian had never spoken to him this calmly or this openly. Usually he barely spoke to North at all, simply throwing out dry orders as if he were a trained animal.

“You’ve got plenty of brute force,” Damian continues casually, changing the subject. “But your technique is far from perfect. You take too many hits these days. Still… your punch is unbelievably strong. I can see you trying, despite everything.”

“I can do better,” Titicharoenrak replies.

“I know. But I can’t give you more time to rest,” Lim says, his sharp gaze lingering on the injuries covering North’s face.

“Should we talk about terrible working conditions?” the young man scoffs, shrugging. “I’m not complaining. As if you care about my condition anyway.”

“You’re right,” Damian says calmly, staring at him with icy eyes. “I don’t care about you.”

“Then why are you here?” North asks.

“This is my building. My office. Is that a problem?” Lim arches an eyebrow.

“No problem. Just strange to see you here. Do you need something? I doubt you came to have a heart-to-heart with me.”

“Norawit,” Damian says simply.

“What about Norawit?”

“Where is your brother?” he asks, slipping his hands into the pockets of his expensive trousers.

“You’re the one who practically shoved a tracking bug up his ass to monitor him. And you’re asking me?” North snorts, brushing past him toward the exit. “Screw you.”

“He’s ignoring my calls,” Damian says suddenly, grabbing his elbow and stopping him.

“He’s ignoring everyone. Me included.”

That was the truth.

Since something went wrong between Norawit and Nattawat, his brother had shut himself off from everyone. North could feel it instinctively, something inside Norawit had broken. The twin bond between them hadn't disappeared.

But his older brother refused to talk about it.

He just stayed in his apartment and drank.

A lot.

Everyone knew he had struggled with alcohol before. Now he had fallen off the wagon completely. The consequences could be serious. Norawit had never gone on a binge this hard before.

And no one knew what had broken him like this. Even Nattawat refused to say what had happened between them.

"What's going on?" Damian asks, frowning.

"Personal problems. He's not in a state to run around carrying out your orders like a trained dog. Do whatever you want, he's not coming," North replies, pulling free from his grip. "Give him time."

"He doesn't have time. Is he sick? Drinking?"

"Yes. Drinking."

"I see," Lim exhales quietly. "That was to be expected."

"What do you need him for?" North asks suspiciously.

"He has a race in…" Damian stops abruptly when several fighters walk into the locker room. He waits until they disappear into the showers before continuing. "…two days."

"Are you even listening to me?" North snaps. "He's not in a condition to drive. Even if he sobers up, he might lose it completely. He's not okay."

"He needs to be sober and at the starting line on time. If he doesn't show up, I'll be forced to take unpleasant measures. You understand that, don't you?" Damian says seriously.

"I understand. But I can't promise anything. He's going through hell right now," Titicharoenrak sighs heavily. "It's complicated. He and Nattawat… have problems. And Nattawat means a lot to him. No one knows how to help."

"What kind of problems?" Damian asks. "Did they fight? Stop talking? Hate each other?"

"Why do you care?" North frowns. "It has nothing to do with you. If he can't race, I'll take his place."

“You wouldn’t last five seconds on Powerslide, idiot.”

“You don’t know me at all, you arrogant piece of trash. I could beat anyone there, including you.”

Lim gives a quiet, mocking chuckle.

Suddenly he grabs North by the neck, his hand sliding into the wet hair at the back of his head and tightening into a fist. He tilts his chin upward slightly, forcing North to meet his eyes.

Damian is a little taller, so his cold gaze drills down from above like a command.

“Are you really this stupid,” he whispers, glancing quickly toward the door, “or are you pretending?”

North struggles weakly as Damian’s grip tightens in his hair.

“Your brother will be killed if he doesn’t show up for that race.”

“He could get killed there too, thanks to you,” North snaps.

“At least there he has a chance to live a little longer. People are betting on him. But if he simply doesn’t show up, I’ll have to eliminate him as an unnecessary obstacle. You need to get him back on his feet and make sure he’s at that race. Understood?”

“Why do you care so much? Bet a lot of money on him? Afraid you’ll embarrass yourself in front of your rich friends?”

“You’re such an idiot,” Lim mutters, rolling his eyes. “Did they knock the last bit of brain out of your skull?”

“Go to hell. Let go.”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” Damian says quietly, “but since Nattawat is involved, it’s in my interest that they both survive until the third stage. Otherwise he won’t race without him, and then I’ll have to take action. And I really don’t want to harm that boy.”

“They broke up or something like that,” North says. “So Nattawat races alone now. Stay away from my brother.”

“You’re very mistaken,” Damian replies calmly. “That doesn’t matter at all. For Hwang, everything must look normal until…”

“What do you have to do with Nattawat? With any of this? Who the hell is Hwang?” North demands, completely baffled.

Damian raises his eyebrows in genuine surprise.

“Oh. They didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Interesting,” Lim murmurs thoughtfully, releasing him.

“What’s interesting? What didn’t they tell me?” North demands, anger rising in his chest. “Do they know something about the race? Tell me.”

“Get your brother sober. He has a race in two days. I shouldn’t even be warning you about this, but since I got involved, I’ll at least help them reach the final. Preferably, no one else should know about this conversation.”

“Explain what’s happening.”

“Your brother should have told you, not me. Apparently they don’t want you to know. I wonder why.”

He studies North for a few seconds, then simply walks toward the exit.

“Ask him yourself.”

“What am I supposed to know?!” North shouts, slamming his fist against a locker door. “What are they hiding from me?!”

“Go home, North. Get some rest,” Damian says over his shoulder. “And take care of that head of yours. There might still be a brain in there. You’ll need it if you ever decide to change.”

Then he leaves.

North inhales sharply and lets out a heavy breath, staring at the place where Lim had been standing only seconds ago.

His mind is spinning with questions.

Could Norawit really be hiding something from him? He never did that. After everything that had happened between them, they had both tried not to keep secrets anymore. Lies and secrets had already cost them too much once.

So what the hell could Norawit possibly be keeping from him?

Maybe something serious had happened and he didn’t want North to worry. But hadn’t North just recently scolded him for doing exactly that?

Norawit had never hidden things from him before.

North was the bad brother, the one who hid his mistakes so Norawit wouldn’t see what a mess he really was.

Now he finally understood how it must have felt for Norawit when he discovered those lies.

And it hurt far more than North expected.

He needed to talk to him. Immediately.

Everything about this situation felt wrong. Even Damian had been strangely different today.

And somehow, he clearly knew more than North did.

How was that possible?

And what had he meant about Nattawat?

Norawit definitely knew something.

North was so deep in thought that he didn't immediately realize something else.

That arrogant, self-absorbed bastard who had treated him like nothing for so long…

had called him by his name for the first time before leaving.

The long, drawn-out ring of the doorbell and the persistent pounding on the door did absolutely nothing to get any kind of response from Norawit. A couple of days ago he had let someone in, but today the door was locked tight from the inside.

The neighbors had already started giving suspicious looks to the aggressive guy in the baseball cap who seemed determined to break into someone else's apartment, but North couldn't care less about that. He knew his brother was home. Most likely he was dead drunk, or sleeping off another binge.

He had tried calling him several times, and each time the ringtone of Norawit's phone could be heard somewhere inside the apartment. Either he was completely out of it, or he simply didn't want to hear anyone. Considering that the reason for his breakdown was Nattawat Jirochtikul, either option seemed possible.

"Norr, open the damn door! I know you're in there. Your bike and your car are downstairs, and I can hear your phone ringing. It's me, let me in!" North shouted, continuing to bang on the door.

Only deafening silence answered him. Not even the creak of the old floorboards inside the apartment could be heard.

He slammed his fist against the wood several more times, hard enough that it nearly felt like the door would come off its hinges. Finally he smacked the surface with his palm in frustration and let out a deep breath.

Useless.

His older brother was just as stubborn as he was. If he didn't open the door now, Norawit would simply ignore him again.

Not today.

This time he wasn't getting out of this conversation. North had questions, and Norawit was going to answer them. He wasn't going to dance around the subject. If he had to, he'd go straight to Nattawat himself for answers. The guys had said Nattawat wasn't in the best mental state either right now, but North honestly didn't care.

He glanced around the hallway thoughtfully, trying to guess where the spare key might be hidden. He had never used it before, but he knew Norawit would have left one for him anyway.

It was an old habit from childhood. Just in case of emergencies, their mother had made a hiding place for a spare key once they were old enough to go to school on their own. Back at their family home, the key had always been tucked under a step of the porch behind a bush with little blue flowers.

He checked under the doormat first. Nothing.

Then he ran his hand along the top of the doorframe. Still nothing.

He examined a decorative flowerpot with some pleasantly scented plant growing inside it. Empty.

That left only one option.

North walked over to the row of narrow mailboxes along the far wall and found the one with Norawit's apartment number. After glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he pulled out his pocketknife and snapped the simple lock. It popped open easily.

A pile of unopened mail immediately spilled out into his hands and onto the floor. When he pushed the envelopes aside and reached inside, his fingers finally brushed against something small taped to the metal wall.

The key.

A victorious grin spread across his face. Of course. He knew his brother too well.

After wrestling with the stubborn lock for several minutes, North finally managed to open the door, now thoroughly battered from his earlier assault, and immediately grimaced.

A thick, heavy smell of alcohol hit him the moment he stepped inside.

It was so strong it stung his nose. It felt like Norawit hadn't aired the place out in a week. The apartment smelled like an old cowboy bar after a wild party—booze, stale smoke, and

something sour lingering in the air. Cigarette smoke hung thick in the hallway instead of drifting away.

The landlady would have been horrified. She barely tolerated him smoking even in the kitchen.

North quietly closed the creaky door behind him. At that exact moment, Jumu came racing toward him from the living room, tail held high in obvious excitement.

The cat began purring immediately, weaving around his legs and demanding attention.

“Hey there, buddy,” North said softly, picking him up and kissing him between his little ears. “Things aren’t going so great here, huh? Did Dad forget about you?”

Jumu rubbed affectionately against his neck and cheek, purring loudly. It was obvious that Norawit had been ignoring him too. The poor thing had been starved for affection and was eagerly seeking it from someone who, in his small feline mind, probably looked a lot like his owner.

“Hungry, aren’t you?”

North kicked off his shoes and walked further down the hallway, listening carefully to the silence of the apartment while still absentmindedly stroking the cat.

It was so quiet it felt as if no one lived here at all.

A strange chill ran down his spine, like the life inside this place had simply stopped.

The kitchen was a mess. The fridge was almost empty, and empty bottles were scattered everywhere. Everything looked exactly the same as it had a couple of months ago. Ever since Nattawat left, it seemed like Norawit only came in here to throw away another batch of empty bottles and pour milk for the cat, because that was practically the only food he kept around.

At least he still remembered to take care of Jumu.

It felt strange how their roles had suddenly reversed.

Since the day their parents died, it had always been Norawit taking care of him. Norawit came to his apartment, cleaned up the mess, made sure he ate properly, dragged him back to life after nights of drinking or drugs.

Now it looked like it was North’s turn to take care of his brother.

His support, his rock, had suddenly broken, and it was all because of this damn thing called love.

North quickly gathered the empty bottles into trash bags. He washed the pile of dishes in the sink, something he never even did in his own place, and then poured milk for Jumu, who immediately pounced on it.

At least he had done one useful thing today. One creature in the world would be a little happier.

He kept thinking about Damian's words, that if he wanted to change his life, he had to start with himself.

Damian was right, damn him.

Every change, good or bad, begins with us. And that was why North was trying to be useful, even in small ways like this.

He gave the satisfied cat one last stroke before following the unmistakable trail of alcohol down the hallway toward Norawit's room.

His brother was lying on the bed without sheets or a blanket, they had been thrown onto the floor in a shapeless pile along with half the other things in the room.

The place was a disaster.

A floor lamp had been smashed to pieces. The television screen was cracked, as if something heavy had been thrown at it. Books and random junk were scattered everywhere underfoot.

Clearly Norawit had trashed the room in a fit of anger or despair.

That was bad.

It meant things were even worse than everyone thought.

North had known his brother wasn't doing well, but he hadn't imagined it was this bad. Norawit had been completely alone all this time, refusing to let anyone in, not even for five minutes.

Only a couple of times had he opened the door for North and Phuwin just long enough to say he was fine before slamming it shut again.

But he wasn't fine at all.

He had been drinking nonstop.

Some guys they knew had seen him a few times at the supermarket around the corner, probably buying another round of alcohol and milk before retreating back into his den to drown his pain.

It was insane. As if nothing in life had changed, except that this time he wasn't hiding his weakness.

Nattawat was a good guy, of course, but right now North genuinely couldn't understand why his brother was suffering so much over what seemed like a simple fight.

All couples argued. That was normal. Relationships didn't exist without conflict. Even he and Night argued over little things sometimes, though their situation was nothing compared to the real relationship their brothers had.

People clashed. They compromised. That was how they learned to live together.

And those two, with their incredibly strong personalities, were bound to clash again and again. They were both stubborn and proud.

But deep down North knew something serious had happened between them. Something much bigger than a simple argument.

Otherwise Norawit wouldn't be drinking like this.

He would never have let Nattawat go so easily.

North walked over to the window, pulled the heavy curtains aside and let sunlight flood the dark room for the first time in days. Then he pushed the window wide open.

A fresh breeze from the Pacific coast rushed inside, cool and clean.

He swept up the shards of broken glass from the floor and tidied the room a little. Otherwise Norawit might cut himself if he stumbled around drunk.

When he finished, he sat down on the bed beside his brother and let out a long breath, studying the sleeping figure.

Norawit looked peaceful.

But even in sleep he looked completely shattered.

Dark crescents hung beneath his eyes. His brows were slightly furrowed. A small scrape marked his cheek, and his brown hair was spread messily across the mattress.

He lay curled in a fetal position, clutching a pillow tightly against his chest.

It looked like the pillow was supposed to be a person.

And it was painfully obvious who that person was meant to be.

Truthfully, North had never seen him this weak before.

Norawit had always been the kind of person who would never show vulnerability easily. Over the years he had built a simple rule for himself: be strong.

It was a good principle for a grown man.

But not for an eleven-year-old boy who had just lost his parents.

Even back then he barely allowed himself any weakness.

And for the first time since then, North was seeing him like this again.

He hated the thought of waking him. As long as he was asleep, he didn't have to feel the crushing weight of the pain in his chest.

But North couldn't let him keep living like this.

It was too much.

Whatever had happened between him and Nattawat, destroying himself wasn't the answer.

Norawit was strong. Much stronger than North himself.

Right now he just needed someone to pull him back.

"Nor, wake up," North said, shaking his shoulder. "Come on. We need to talk."

Norawit only frowned faintly in response, letting out a long groan and clutching the pillow even tighter.

North slapped his cheek lightly.

Norawit rolled onto his back but remained half-asleep.

"Wake up," North insisted, nudging him again.

"Go to hell," Norawit mumbled irritably, squinting at the sunlight before covering his eyes with his arm.

"Get up. I need to talk to you. You've got a race tomorrow, you need to pull yourself together."

No response.

He was already drifting back to sleep.

Gentle methods clearly weren't going to work. What he needed now was shock therapy.

North took a deep breath, grabbed Norawit by the arms, and hauled him upright. Norawit didn't even open his eyes, his head hanging limply.

With effort, North heaved his brother over his shoulder and dragged him toward the bathroom.

His right side throbbed from the weight, but he ignored the pain. He'd deal with it later, with ice and painkillers.

He flicked on the bathroom light and set Norawit down inside the shower stall. Norawit immediately leaned his cheek against the cool tile wall.

North shook his head.

The guy still hadn’t woken up.

How much had he drunk?

Probably hadn’t sobered up once all week.

Damian had said Norawit needed to be brought back to his senses, and there was no time left.

The race was tomorrow.

If Norawit didn’t show up, someone would kill him without hesitation.

At least this way he still had a chance.

North watched him for a few seconds, almost apologetically, then turned the cold water on full blast and closed the glass door, bracing it shut with his back.

Norawit screamed as the icy water hit his head.

Then came a stream of furious curses as he tried to escape the makeshift trap.

North didn’t budge.

He held the door firmly, patiently waiting for the storm to pass.

He knew his brother too well. First anger would come, then acceptance.

Inside the shower Norawit pounded on the glass, shouting and swearing. In his drunken state he didn’t even realize he could easily shut the water off by turning the valve behind him.

His brain wasn’t working that way right now.

A few minutes passed.

Eventually the yelling faded into heavy breathing over the sound of the water.

North opened the door slowly and shut the water off.

Norawit sat curled up in the shower, knees pulled to his chest, his face buried in his hands.

North sank down onto the bathroom floor in front of him.

“Feeling more human?” he asked carefully.

Norawit pushed his wet hair back and looked up at him with glassy eyes.

“Couldn’t come up with anything better, idiot?” he muttered irritably. “Get lost. I don’t need a babysitter.”

North studies his brother carefully, thinking that Damian might actually be right about something. Alcohol loosens the tongue. Right now he might have a chance to pull the truth

out of him, something Norawit would never say while sober.

He leads him back into the room and sits him down on the edge of the bed. Norawit wraps the towel tighter around himself and sits there for a few minutes, arms folded around his own body, lost in thought. Then he reaches down, picks up a pack of cigarettes from the floor, and lights one, holding it between his lips.

His cheeks hollow sharply, leaving only the sharp lines of his cheekbones as he drags the smoke deep into his lungs and keeps it there for a few seconds until his throat burns. Then he exhales slowly through his nose.

He's shaking badly, probably from the cold. Or maybe from the brutal hangover. His entire body aches and he doesn't even know why anymore. It feels like something inside him has broken. As if a massive truck had rolled over him and left nothing alive behind, and now he has no idea what could possibly make him feel normal again.

"Did he send you?" Norawit whispers with a trace of hidden hope, staring blankly at the floor as he exhales a thick column of smoke.

"Who?"

"Nattawat."

"No. Was he supposed to?"

"I don't know. He hasn't called or texted me since that day. I don't know what's going on with him or how he is," the young man says quietly, sniffling as he holds the cigarette in front of his face.

"So you're not talking at all?"

Norawit nods, pain clearly written across his face.

"I miss him so much, Northie," he says, awkwardly rubbing his forehead with his fingers. "God, it hurts so much I could die from it. I feel like I'm breaking apart without him. I just want to hug him. I drink just so I don't have to feel any of this or think about it. Everything reminds me of him. Even the damn pillow smells like him. It's hell."

"Then make up with him. You love him," the younger one says, frowning.

"It's not that simple," Norawit replies, shaking his head as he takes a long drag.

He is so monstrously broken without him. The loneliness and pain he feels in this moment are so palpable that even North feels the weight of it pressing down on him.

That man is vital to him. He needs to see him, feel him, hear him. Hold his hand. Hug him. Breathe in his scent. Hear his stupid laugh.

He just needs Nattawat. That's all.

And for the first time in his life, North realizes that his older brother might need someone more than he needs him.

“I think I understand,” he says quietly as he sits down on the floor in front of him, between his legs.

Norawit immediately wraps his arms around his shoulders from behind, just like he used to when they were kids, and presses a kiss to the crown of his mint-scented hair.

“Is it because of the truth you two are hiding from me?”

“How do you know I’m hiding something from you?” Norawit asks in surprise, resting his chin on top of his head.

“Damian.”

“Of course,” Norawit scoffs. “Who would’ve doubted he’d tell you everything. I didn’t want you to know. Well… I was going to tell you, just in a softer way. It’s hard to accept a truth like that, so I thought I should prepare you first. Although… how do you even prepare someone for that? Especially since I know Night is important to you right now. It’s complicated. But I was going to tell you later.”

“Yeah,” Titicharoenrak’s younger brother says slowly, not fully understanding what he means. What does that guy have to do with anything? But he pretends he does, hoping to pull more information out of him. “You know Lim never beats around the bush.”

“I know. I just didn’t want you to start thinking about our parents again. Especially about that night. It’s hard for you. Honestly, I regret digging into all of this so much. But I just wanted to know the truth. Is that so wrong? And now I keep asking myself why. Why did I need the name of the man who killed them?” he asks, his tongue slightly heavy as he raises an eyebrow and idly runs his fingers through North’s hair. “Why didn’t I do what you did? Just shut it all off and move on somehow. Why did I look for him? For what? I can’t even kill him… I mean… fuck, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with this truth. That’s all. Nattawat hates him, sure, but he definitely doesn’t want him dead.”

“Why would he protect that bastard?” North asks carefully, gently pulling away.

“Because it’s Nattawat. He’s a good person.”

“Then why can’t you get revenge anyway?”

“Would you be able to kill your boyfriend’s father?” Norawit asks with a crooked smile, shaking his head. “I’m not sure. Although at this point… maybe nothing would stop me. I want it so badly,” he whispers, his voice so full of pain that something tightens painfully inside North’s chest.

Norawit reaches toward the bedside table and pulls out a gun.

He places it on the edge of the bed.

North freezes instantly, his frightened gaze locking onto the weapon.

What the hell?

Where did he even get that?

His eyes widen like saucers, something fragile and wounded shattering inside them. It feels like a sharp crack echoes through the room, like thin ice splitting beneath your feet while you're standing on it. One wrong move and you're done. You fall into the freezing water and the current drags you under.

But in reality, it's the sound of his heart breaking, because in that moment he suddenly understands far too much.

Deep in his brown eyes, realization flashes all at once. Bright. Devastating.

Norawit frowns as he watches him.

Inside North's mind, scattered pieces begin snapping together into one terrifying picture. But believing it is almost impossible. The thought itself sounds too unbelievable to be real.

He needs to hear it from him.

"So… Night and Nattawat's father… you're sure?" he asks hoarsely, clearing his throat.

"I'm sure. He was right under our noses all this time, just impossible to catch. Now I know his name and his face, but I have no idea how I'm supposed to live with this truth. Nattawat… I love him, you understand?" Norawit says, his voice breaking. "For real. I wanted to give him my whole life. But… God. How can I? I won't be able to rest while that bastard is alive. But how can I take him away from them? How would that make me any better? He's a terrible person, I know that. But somewhere deep down Night still loves him, and he doesn't even know the truth."

"So their father really is Hwang? He killed our parents?" the boy whispers, his voice trembling. "That's why you don't want to be with Nattawat? That's what's stopping you?"

"You can't believe it either, can you?" Norawit nods slowly, rubbing his hands over his face. "I want to be with him. I want it so badly it hurts. But when I look at him, everything inside me twists. I see Mom's lifeless eyes. The blood… I hear the screams and the gunshot… Dad… I don't know how to turn that off. How am I supposed to separate it? It's not his fault. I know damn well it's not his fault, but how do I live with that? Could you let all of this go just to be with Night?"

"I… I don't… this has to be a mistake. That can't be right. How could that be possible?" North asks faintly, staring ahead with stunned eyes.

His brother understands everything from that look.

"Shit," Norawit whispers when he realizes what that expression means. "You didn't know. That's not what he told you, is it?"

“He just said that you were hiding something from me.”

“I thought Damian told you everything. He knows it all. Damn it,” the older Titicharoenrak sighs, running a hand through his hair. “This isn’t how I wanted to tell you.”

“Does he know Hwang is their father?”

“Hwang and his father are the same person. Lim is their brother. And all those races and fights… we were dragged into them on purpose. They want to kill me during one of the races. As long as I keep racing, I can stay alive a little longer. But sooner or later they’ll finish me off if I don’t come up with something. Their father wants me dead at Powerslide so he can walk away clean again. After all, it’s just a race. Who cares about another dead street racer? That bastard is clever.”

“And they’ll kill me in the ring,” North whispers, nodding slowly. “That’s why my opponents keep getting stronger and I get less and less time to rest. They’re just killing me slowly.”

“They’re trying to remove us from the road. Quietly. Without consequences.”

“Then what’s stopping him from just killing us outright? Why drag it out like this?”

Norawit slowly stands and searches through his things until he finds the evidence he had hidden. He sits down on the floor in front of him and hands him a book filled with documents and a recorder.

For a few seconds he hesitates to press the button.

Because he knows what will follow.

Their father’s voice will destroy North forever. The realization of this monstrous truth will start a process of destruction that cannot be undone. But in reality it’s already too late.

His little brother is already falling apart, without even fully understanding the horror yet.

“What is this?” the boy asks in confusion.

“The reason we lost our family,” Norawit replies before pressing play and taking a deep breath.

While North listens to their father’s voice, it’s as if he stops breathing altogether.

He doesn’t move. He doesn’t speak.

He just stares at one point as he rapidly collapses before Norawit’s eyes.

It feels like he no longer exists.

He doesn’t hear the ocean outside the window anymore or the cat purring on the chair. He doesn’t feel the breeze brushing his skin or the air filling his lungs. He doesn’t see the sunlight dancing across the walls.

No smells. No sensations. No sounds.

No cold. No warmth.

No happiness. No pain.

No anger. No regret.

All he feels now is emptiness.

Inside him and all around him.

It devours him like some enormous kraken, swallowing everything alive in its path, dragging ships beneath the clear water.

The truth is too much for him to bear.

Painful memories crash over him like a wall of heavy rain, soaking through him and sinking into the deepest places beneath his skin, into that darkness where his demons live.

Once again he is that child who watched his mother being murdered, swallowing his screams along with bitter tears so those men wouldn't hear him. Her suffering remained frozen in his eyes for years, followed by his father's sudden death.

Just one loud gunshot.

One damn shot that divided his life into before and after.

That night he watched life leave the people he loved most.

And now he feels like life is leaving him.

It's too much.

The most painful trigger he had spent years avoiding has now been ripped out by the roots, releasing everything he had buried.

His family had always been a festering wound that never healed. He had never let go of them, of what happened, of the pain. And he never could change it. He could never go back to that night and save them.

Now everything has dragged him back to those days when he first realized what had happened.

Inside he feels unbearable pain. Bones breaking. Organs twisting. His soul turning inside out. His heart tearing at the seams.

His inner voice lets out a wild scream, and in that moment he becomes one with the pain.

He lets it fill him without even trying to resist, allowing it to destroy him one last time.

Nothing in this world matters anymore.

He barely understands what is happening around him. The only thing he hears is the terrified voice on the final recording from the recorder.

Even breathing hurts.

Their father hadn't been afraid of death. He had been afraid that his sons would be killed because of his curiosity.

And now they truly were in mortal danger from the very same man who had killed him.

Even his brother's tight embrace cannot bring North back.

Something inside him hardens forever.

His heart turns into stone, and his soul wraps itself in armor.

Everyone has a limit: of strength, of pain, of endurance. Some people can carry it for years. Others break within minutes.

North had been holding this pain inside for ten years.

Now he had reached his limit.

He had never needed this truth. But that's the cruel law of life. The truth always comes out at the worst possible moment, when no one expects it.

You cannot hide it forever.

It always finds a way to be heard.

And it is terrifying to feel something this monstrous without knowing what to do with it next.

Because he had only just begun reaching toward the light he had finally found in his life.

And now he was plunging back into darkness.

His demons had finally won.

The second stage of "Powerslide" was even more terrifying than any of the others.

The track itself was simple, familiar. They had raced here many times with street racers during illegal runs. But that wasn't what worried Nattawat. What terrified him was the outcome. In a solo race, Norawit was in real danger.

Yesterday Lim had called him and made one thing very clear: his boyfriend needed to be especially careful today. Someone would probably try to kill him before he even made it to the final.

Norawit had no allies in this race. Not a single one.

Except Nattawat.

And even though everything between them was strained, tangled and painful, he would still protect him at any cost.

The truth was, however, that Nattawat's fear came from something deeper. They were on different teams now in every possible sense. In the race. In life. He hadn't realized until this moment just how much he had relied on Norawit's support until he lost it.

His insides twisted with anxiety and a strange, trembling anticipation. Just the thought that he might see him, even for a second, made something inside him shake like a lovestruck schoolgirl. His heart beat stupidly fast, spiraling out of control in his chest.

Norawit had to come today. He wouldn't back out of the race, not with the risks involved.

And that was exactly what made it so terrifying.

Nattawat had no idea how he would react when they met again.

He had deliberately avoided making the situation worse. He stepped away instead, even though it had been incredibly hard. Every single day he fought himself hundreds of times not to text him, not to call him. Even when he found himself stopping outside Norawit's house out of habit, he never allowed himself to go inside.

It was hell.

But he had no right to pressure him.

Norawit needed time. He had to think everything through on his own, alone with his thoughts. Only after that would they be able to talk again and decide what would become of them.

Nattawat wasn't ready to let him go.

But he was ready to accept any choice Norawit made with dignity.

Because the pain Norawit carried was something he would have to live with for the rest of his life.

And the question remained: would he have the strength for that?

With every stage of "Powerslide," the number of racers kept shrinking. After the madness with the train, another driver had died. Now only five names remained on the roster.

Strangely, they had even brought back the one who had surrendered last time.

It was frightening to imagine why.

Most likely he had been given some kind of role in this race. Perhaps they would simply kill him for his cowardice, but do it in a spectacular way for the audience's amusement.

At the moment, four racers stood at the starting line.

Only one was missing.

Nattawat glanced at the timer counting down the final two minutes and swallowed the knot of nerves in his throat. He inhaled deeply through his nose and slowly let the air out through his mouth, running his hands over the steering wheel of the Mustang.

He'll come.

He has to come.

He must understand that if he doesn't, he's finished.

But Nattawat also knew Norawit had been in terrible shape lately. Drinking too much. Falling apart. The hope inside him crumbled almost as quickly as the seconds on the timer disappeared.

Was he really going to defy them?

That would be suicide. They didn't even have a plan yet to destroy the control system.

Panic began to gnaw at him. He nervously bit his thumbnail and tapped his foot to the rhythm of the song playing in the car.

One minute.

Just one minute left.

He was already starting to lose control of himself when suddenly a black Porsche appeared on the horizon, sliding out from behind the turn. The roar of its engine tore through the air.

A smile spread across Nattawat's face before he could stop it, and he let out a quiet breath of relief.

His heart started pounding like crazy, as if he were seeing him for the first time.

Even though it was just his car.

God, he missed him.

Right now he would give anything in the world just to feel the warmth of Norawit's skin again. To hear his soft voice. Even to catch the faint scent of watermelon or see that breathtaking smile for a fleeting second.

But the windows of the Porsche were tinted.

So Nattawat forced himself to stop dreaming and focus on the race.

The Porsche rolled to a stop on his left, the last car in the row. Norawit didn't turn off the engine. There was no point now. The starting signal would come any second.

Fifteen seconds.

Nattawat couldn't take his eyes off the car beside him.

A soft smile tugged at his lips as memories surfaced in his mind. Norawit's beautiful eyes turning into crescent moons when he laughed. That bright, mischievous laugh. That warm, purring voice.

"Hey, baby," he whispered under his breath, inhaling sharply as the ache in his chest flared with unbearable longing.

None of that mattered right now.

The only thing that mattered was reaching the finish line. And Nattawat would do everything in his power to make sure Norawit survived this race.

He had to finish it, if only to spite Nut.

Otherwise they would kill him today. Right in front of Nattawat's eyes.

Nattawat was almost certain something would happen during the race. Some kind of trap. In any other situation, Damian wouldn't have warned him.

That bastard knew perfectly well that Nattawat only participated in "Powerslide" because of Norawit.

A loud siren-like sound echoed through the Mustang's cabin.

Nattawat slammed his foot on the gas along with the other racers.

The cars launched forward so violently that the asphalt probably melted beneath their tires at the improvised starting line near the traffic lights in the Arts District.

One of the competitors immediately surged ahead, but Nattawat didn't rush to overtake them. There would be time for that later. All that mattered was finishing in the top three to reach the final stage.

Right now, staying close to Norawit was more important.

He wasn't worried about Norawit's driving anymore. Technically, Norawit had been flawless in the last race. He had even managed to beat Nattawat himself.

And that meant a lot.

Through sheer determination and relentless effort, Norawit had surpassed his own teacher.

Honestly, Nattawat considered him the clear favorite among all the racers.

Experience could make someone a good driver. But becoming this good without years behind the wheel required real talent.

And Norawit had it.

He had learned everything in an unbelievably short time and reached an incredible level.

He deserved to be called the leader of "Powerslide."

That was probably the only thing stopping Nut from killing him outright. The money he brought in and the public fascination with him.

Nut hadn't expected the obstacle in his path to become this dangerous.

So he moved carefully, arranging Norawit's death to happen during a race. An unfortunate accident.

Norawit's Porsche sped along to Nattawat's left, half a car length ahead.

For a while, that was enough to keep Nattawat calm.

But not for long.

At the first turn, the entire order shifted. Some drivers misjudged the corner and lost their advantage.

And suddenly, to everyone's surprise, the Porsche surged forward.

Second place.

The betting odds on him would probably double now.

But that wouldn't save him today.

If Nut wanted him dead, he would do whatever it took.

No amount of money would stop him now.

The problem was that this had become personal.

What kind of monster had to be to play such a filthy game? To gamble with someone's life in plain sight as if it were nothing more than entertainment.

What kind of trap had they prepared this time?

It was terrifying to imagine.

Or maybe everything was aimed at Norawit alone.

The cars tore down the road one after another, constantly shifting positions.

Norawit held second place. His position was steady, his driving skilled, though not always perfectly precise. He used everything he had learned during training.

But it was obvious he was driving aggressively today.

The Porsche moved sharply, darting between lanes in sudden bursts. If someone blocked his path, he pushed forward like a battering ram, reclaiming the lead.

Even though everyone was technically racing for themselves, Norawit couldn't pretend he didn't care.

His eyes kept drifting to the rearview mirror.

The black Mustang with the dragon on its hood was behind him in fourth place.

Nattawat wasn't even trying to fight for first.

Norawit knew him too well.

He was only racing because he had to.

Winning meant nothing to him.

Truthfully, it meant nothing to any of them anymore.

Everyone in those cars understood they were neck-deep in real trouble with no way out.

There were only two possible endings here.

Live.

Or die.

If they behaved well and raced well, their chances of survival increased.

But not everyone had that chance.

Among the spectators, Norawit was almost the undeniable favorite. Yet he already knew that "Powerslide" would be his last race.

Someone wanted him dead.

But he had no intention of surrendering so easily.

Not for himself. Not even for his brother. Not even for Nattawat.

He was doing this for justice.

That was what drove him forward.

Nuthwang was still alive. Still free.

How could Norawit allow that?

Should that bastard simply remove him from the board and continue doing all this?

No.

Norawit wouldn’t allow it.

That was why he was here.

He wouldn’t stop until he finished what he started.

He had plenty of time to think about it now.

He didn’t yet know how he would end this war, but he knew one thing for certain.

Nuthwang had to be destroyed.

At any cost.

Some people would say revenge solves nothing.

Maybe if his parents were still alive, they would condemn him for thinking this way.

But they weren’t.

And there was no one left to judge him.

All he wanted was justice.

People like Nuthwang belonged in hell or behind bars, not serving as the face of the law.

Sometimes, when fighting for what is right forces you to become ruthless toward your enemy, that ruthlessness becomes justified.

Especially when your enemy is a monster.

Revenge had to be done the right way.

Norawit still didn’t know exactly how he would carry it out.

But surviving this race would already be a small act of revenge.

Ruining Hwang’s plans for the race and for his death would be Norawit’s first strike in this war.

For some reason, the second lap feels like it lasts forever. The road stretches endlessly ahead, even though everyone here, everyone except Norawit, knows this track like the back of their hand. He hates the fact that he's the only one relying on a navigator while the others clearly drive by instinct. But he isn't part of the street racing crowd. They have their own usual place for races.

The opponent ahead of him is the same driver in the yellow sports car who screwed up earlier. This time he's in front, but Titicharoenrak is already closing the gap, pulling up alongside him. According to the arrow on the navigator, there's a sharp turn coming up in three hundred meters. That's his chance to snatch the win. That guy isn't nearly as good at drifting as he is.

Norawit flicks a quick glance into the rearview mirror and sees Nattawat trying to shake another rival off his tail. The other driver clearly wants to ram him, but Nattawat alternates between easing off the gas and pressing down hard, maneuvering with effortless precision. He manages to predict the man's moves, slipping away from every attempted hit, but then the last car in the race enters the game. It's been trailing behind the whole time.

Now it speeds up, closing the distance between them, trying to smash into the rear bumper of one car and then the other. Nattawat jerks the wheel sharply to the side and eases off the gas, slipping out of the improvised attack line. The other driver isn't nearly as lucky.

The impact is brutal.

The silver sports car spins several times across the road before suddenly lifting off the ground. Nattawat barely avoids crashing into it, shooting underneath at almost impossible speed just seconds before the car slams back onto the asphalt.

His heart drops into his stomach, flooded with a raw, animal kind of terror. The vehicle behind him bounces violently across the road, and then explodes. The loud blast makes him flinch, forcing him to slow down so he doesn't become the next twisted piece of metal in the wreckage.

Now he's in last place.

Which means Norawit is alone against two opponents.

Nattawat watches them take the turn, and then Norawit pulls ahead, stealing the lead. He's first now, but damn it, it has never felt this terrifying before. His father definitely won't like this. Everything is going too smoothly.

During the qualifiers someone tampered with their brakes. In the first stage they were forced into a race against a train.

So what the hell comes next?

As if answering his silent question, the prepared part of the race begins.

The yellow sports car suddenly veers off and disappears around a turn, leaving the street entirely.

What the hell?

Nattawat's mind races, trying to figure out what it means. And when they reach the final straight, coming out of the next corner, the realization hits him all at once.

Norawit is the only one who doesn't know this track.

And that's exactly what they're counting on.

The element of surprise.

It ruins almost everyone who races here for the first time. That's the beauty of this route, its unpredictability for newcomers. Just before the finish line there's another brutal turn. It isn't marked on their navigators, but every street racer knows about it.

You have to slow down hard there, or you'll slam straight into the wall.

But Norawit will hesitate at the fork. Because there's a dead end waiting for him.

And while he tries to figure out what's happening and correct the direction, it'll already be too late.

From the blind corner, the same car that left the race will appear, and crash straight into him.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Nattawat shouts, gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turn white. "God damn it!"

The moment he realizes just how dangerous, how fatal, this situation is, something inside him flips like a switch. Every instinct sharpens at once.

Norawit is in real danger.

And Damien hadn't been joking.

Most likely that car was planted in the race for exactly this moment, with the driver waiting for the right command.

And that moment is now.

Norawit's life is being measured in seconds.

For him, the race ended the instant the order came through the transmitter to take him out.

Right before Nattawat's eyes, the Porsche suddenly slams on the brakes while still racing toward the unmarked turn. Norawit has realized he's driving straight into a wall, so he starts slowing down just in time. The tires scream as he drops the speed almost to zero, the car swerving slightly across the road.

But just as he turns into the correct corner—

the suicide driver flies out from behind it.

The sound of metal crashing into metal is deafening.

It tears through the air: grinding steel, shattering glass, the shriek of brakes.

Nattawat wants to shut his eyes, just to avoid seeing it, to never open them again.

Another car slams into the passenger side of the Porsche at full speed. The impact spins it one hundred and eighty degrees and throws it violently into the concrete barrier.

The instant Nattawat sees the mangled wreck of Titicharoenrak's car, he slams the brake pedal to the floor.

The Mustang resists, roaring, coughing smoke, but finally obeys.

He doesn't care how this ends anymore.

The only thing in his head is Norawit.

All their conflicts, all their personal problems mean nothing right now. If Norawit is hurt, Nattawat would crawl into a burning car to pull him out.

He finally stops on the side of the road not far from the crash and freezes, pressing a hand over his mouth. Somewhere behind him he hears the roar of the surviving rival's engine racing toward the finish line, but he couldn't care less.

He just stares at the wrecked Porsche, blinking slowly and praying that Norawit survived.

It takes him a few seconds to snap out of it.

Then he jumps out of the Mustang and runs toward him without thinking.

At that moment Norawit unbuckles his seatbelt and struggles to push open the driver's door. He's alive, but he's in deep shock, like he's lost somewhere in space.

For the first time in his life, a car had raced straight at him with the intention of killing him.

So it's all real.

He stumbles out of the car but somehow manages to get back on his feet, slowly stepping away from the wreck. A splitting pain tears through his skull. He feels blood running down his temple and touches it carefully with his fingers, as if trying to convince himself that this is actually happening.

Miraculously, nothing seems broken. Everything somehow held together. But he slammed his head against the side window during the collision.

It's terrifying to imagine what would have happened if the car had hit the driver's side.

The world spins around him, but then he sees a familiar silhouette ahead, and everything inside him twists into a tight knot.

About five meters away stands Nattawat.

Damn it… it feels like they haven't seen each other in forever.

And at the sight of him, Norawit's treacherous heart gives everything away. It jolts to life instantly, beating so fast and so hard it feels like it might rip through his chest and fall at Nattawat's feet on the asphalt.

God, he misses him.

Nattawat takes a cautious step forward, watching him carefully, and spends a few seconds fighting with himself.

He wants to run to him.

To wrap him in his arms, hold him tight, kiss him over and over until he can't anymore.

But he can't allow himself that, not if he wants to respect Norawit's comfort.

Instead he takes a shaky breath and gathers himself.

He walks over calmly, gently taking Norawit by the arm. He leads him to the Mustang and carefully helps him into the driver's seat.

Norawit looks at him in confusion, studying his face now that it's so close.

"What are you doing?" he asks as Nattawat fastens his seatbelt.

"You have to cross the finish line."

"But I already lost."

"No. Only two of us are left. The other guy already drove off."

"So…"

"Yes. If you reach the finish now, you automatically move on," Nattawat says, climbing into the passenger seat. "You just have to finish in the top three. Remember?"

"And what about you?" Norawit asks quietly, frowning. "Won't they hurt you for this?"

"I don't know. Probably not. My father still needs me for the final."

"And if he doesn't?"

"This is your race, you understand?" Nattawat says, looking straight at him. "You have to win. And I'm not talking about Powerslide right now. There are people watching us on the other side of those screens, including Nut. We're both taking a risk and we have no idea what

comes next, but screw him. He wanted to kill you. So show him you're ready to fight for yourself. How many more times are you going to let him beat you before he finally stops?"

"You're right," Norawit nods weakly. "I've had enough."

"This is your war."

"I'm not sure I can drive right now. Everything is spinning."

"Speed doesn't matter anymore. Start the car. Close your eyes if you have to. Right now, I'm your eyes. Just like in Ojai. Trust me one more time."

He clicks his own seatbelt into place.

"For the last time," Nattawat says quietly. "If you fall, I'll catch you."

For a few seconds Norawit stares blankly at the Mustang emblem on the steering wheel, feeling something inside him twist painfully at those words.

They matter so much right now.

They are exactly what he needs to hear.

He needs to know that despite everything, Nattawat is still on his side, at least in this cursed race.

This gesture tells him more than words ever could.

"Why are you doing this?" he whispers.

"Because the best racer should cross the finish line," Nattawat answers, watching him carefully. "And I'm not talking about myself right now, *koi no yokan*."

Chapter 15: the little prince

Chapter Notes

> This chapter's text places significant focus on the topic of drug use. Please read with caution. I do not condone it and have a strongly negative attitude toward it. Take care of yourself and your life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Late in the evening, the luxurious mansion of the Jirochtikul family glowed with elegant hidden lighting, looking almost like a fairytale castle set in one of the most pristine and perfect neighborhoods of Los Angeles.

Only the one who lived inside it was far from a beautiful Princess Belle.

Behind those high fences and rows of manicured hedges lived a true monster, one that had never been cursed by magic.

This was where Nuthwang usually hid from the world. Inside those walls he could take off his masks and become himself… though not entirely. Even in front of his own children he had never been sincere. They had no idea what kind of man he truly was. An astonishing hypocrisy lived inside him, two faces hidden perfectly within one person.

Now that North knew the truth, it no longer surprised him.

That piece of filth would be home soon.

North knew it because he had been following him since morning. Now he waited in the darkness beneath a tree, silent and motionless, watching the estate. Cameras lined the perimeter. Guards stood posted at nearly every corner. The place was less a home and more an impenetrable fortress. Getting any closer would mean being spotted immediately.

He didn't have a grand plan.

He hadn't even intended to come here tonight.

At first, he had only wanted to see that bastard with his own eyes.

But now he wanted to kill him.

The only thing filling his mind was death, just as cruel as the one that had been given to his parents. More than anything in the world, he wanted to destroy this man. The desire burned

inside him like some infernal flame, scorching through his insides, turning even his bones to ash.

Rain hammered against the asphalt again tonight, drawing circles across deep puddles and filling the air with a soft, endless rustling. It was cold enough to seep into a person's bones.

But even that cold couldn't cool the fire raging inside him.

The rain soaked his skin, ran through his hair and down his face, but it never reached the place where the real inferno burned.

Inside him were the ruins of Pompeii.

A small world destroyed, buried beneath volcanic ash after a violent eruption. Walls collapsed under the avalanche of unbearable pain. Everything inside him had been shattered. And it felt impossible to repair.

All Titicharoenrak felt now was emptiness, and the hollow echo of an inner voice, howling like wind through an abandoned place.

He watched the falling rain with lifeless eyes, clouded by the drug pulsing through his veins, breathing slowly and evenly. Water streamed down his hair, his face, his hands, but he barely seemed to feel it.

From the outside, he probably looked like a beaten, homeless stray puppy.

At least, that's exactly how he felt.

His willpower had failed him.

He had fought it for so long, but in the end he couldn't stop himself from opening his hiding place and pulling out the dose he had kept there. He had lied to his brother when he said he'd thrown everything away.

The doubt lasted only a few minutes.

Then the urge to escape reality became unbearable.

And so he did.

He had never wanted to return to this addiction, but right now he desperately needed to shut the world off, to stop feeling the dull, relentless pain in his chest, even if only for a few hours.

The drug helped.

For now.

But soon the numbness would fade, and everything would come crashing back again. Another small apocalypse waiting just beyond the horizon.

In his hand he held the pistol he had stolen from his brother the night he learned the truth.

After that, he had disappeared. Norawit had slept for several more hours and then gone to the race where someone had tried to kill him again.

Why North had taken the gun in the first place, he didn't even know.

At the time it had been pure impulse.

The storm of emotions inside him hadn't quieted for a single damn second. They pressed in on him from all sides, suffocating him with their force.

Now they were the ones in control.

He had lost himself completely.

The final thread that had still connected him to reality had snapped the moment he learned the truth, a truth no one needed and one he had never wanted to know.

Now the darkness kept pulling him deeper, swallowing him whole, leaving him no way out.

He needed to find his way back to the light somehow.

But he had no idea how.

Instead, the same memory played over and over in his mind, the night their lives had been destroyed by men dressed in black.

The dull thuds of heavy blows.

The sound of boots striking a defenseless woman.

Her screams turning into broken whimpers.

Her desperate pleas for help.

Her tears.

Her eyes had burned themselves into his memory forever.

So vivid. So painfully clear.

Eyes filled with unbearable sorrow, slowly losing the light of life.

She had died slowly. Agonizingly.

And in the final moments, lying helplessly on the floor, she had looked toward the closet doors behind which her son was hiding.

What could possibly be more devastating than that?

Everything she was thinking in that moment had been written plainly in her tear-filled eyes.

No physical pain could compare to the terror she felt for her child.

She had been silently begging him to stay hidden, to remain quiet so they wouldn't find him.

And even though he had been terrified beyond words, the little boy understood.

On some instinctive, almost telepathic level, he heard her.

And he obeyed her final request.

For years, North had believed that those seconds were the most horrifying moments of his life, watching the light fade from her eyes.

Then came the gunshot.

And silence.

A terrible, suffocating silence.

It had been so overwhelming that it deafened him for years. He had lived inside that silence. He remembered screaming until his throat tore apart, and then being unable to speak a single word afterward.

But he had been wrong.

The most terrifying moment of his life was now.

Now, years later, when he had returned to it all again.

Now that the wound had been ripped open once more, he realized how deeply it had broken him.

He had no strength left to scream.

No strength to cry.

No strength to let any of it out.

He simply kept existing.

Not truly alive.

And he had no idea what could possibly save him from all of this.

The guy flinches slightly when he hears the quiet hum of an engine and notices headlights cutting through the darkness near the bend in the road. Two cars roll up to the main gates of the house and slow to a stop.

Security gets out of the SUV in front. One of the guards heads toward the small booth by the entrance, while the other runs to the black car with an umbrella. A moment later, holding a folder of documents, Nut Jirochtikul steps out of the back seat as the guard opens the door for him. The man is on the phone, speaking sharply, clearly arguing with someone about yet another filthy deal.

Something explodes inside North the instant he sees him again.

Only now does he truly understand the wild, burning desire his brother had to destroy this man.

It's impossible to look at him calmly knowing everything. For reasons no one could ever explain, this person—no, this creature—had decided he had the right to shape other people's fates. Somehow he had crowned himself God, a role no one had ever given him, choosing who deserved to live and who would die.

But not tonight.

Tonight it ends.

Titicharoenrak raises his hand with the gun and aims it at the man standing beside the car. A white haze clouds his vision from the drugs and the fury roaring inside him. It dulls every other emotion, yet at the same time he feels everything with unbearable intensity.

He's certain of what he's about to do.

And yet his hand trembles violently.

It isn't fear. It isn't hesitation. But he can't steady himself. He has a few minutes while the man stands in the open, perfectly exposed—yet he can't line up the shot because of the storm raging inside him.

He takes a slow breath and blinks hard several times, trying to clear the blur from his eyes.

"Don't do it."

A quiet voice sounds beside him.

North jerks his head toward the sound and sees a familiar figure stepping out of the darkness with an unhurried stride.

He exhales irritably and rolls his eyes.

What the hell is he doing here?

Damian approaches slowly, pulling the hood of his light jacket further over his head to shield his face from the rain. North notices immediately that he looks different today.

Usually flawless and impeccably dressed in expensive suits, he now looks like an ordinary guy—simple jeans, a dark gray windbreaker. He even seems younger, at least five years

shaved off his usual polished image. It feels as if he never intended to meet anyone tonight; this version of him is nothing like the persona he normally presents so carefully.

It's almost impossible to catch Lim off guard.

Which means he truly hadn't planned this meeting.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Titicharoenrak mutters irritably, turning back toward the gate. He wipes rain from his face with his sleeve and pushes his hair back, preparing to shoot again.
"Go wherever you were going."

"I was going here," Damian replies calmly. "I noticed you near your house. You looked strange, and my instincts rarely lie. So I followed you to make sure. What—decided to speed up your inevitable meeting with prison?"

"I don't need your lectures. Get lost."

"You're about to make a serious mistake."

"Killing that bastard will be the most decent thing I've ever done," North whispers sharply. "Don't even think about defending your father."

"That's not what I'm talking about," Lim says calmly, stopping two steps away. He shivers slightly in the cool rain. "Your temperament is working against you right now."

He tilts his head, studying him with quiet interest.

"The foundation of a precise shot is proper stance. When taking a firing position, you should use every possible support—your own hand, for example. To shoot well, the weapon must remain perfectly still when aimed at the target. But the shot itself requires a controlled movement at the critical moment."

His eyes flick to North's shaking hands.

"And yours are trembling. You're rushing. You're nervous. That ruins everything."

He pauses.

"Do you know the key to a perfect shot?"

"Go to hell," North scoffs.

"Calm," Damian answers.

"You're going to teach me now?" North hisses under his breath, blinking away the darkness creeping into his vision. "Back off. You're in my way."

"You're holding the gun wrong. Your hands are shaking. Your focus is broken. Your position is terrible. The rain is a serious obstacle. And that glazed look in your eyes…"

He studies him briefly.

“You’re high, aren’t you? Judging by your eyes—yes. You’ll miss, Titicharoenrak.”

Damian glances toward the man standing by the gates.

“The guards will catch you before you even reach cover. This is practically suicide. I suggest you lower the weapon.”

“And I suggest you shut up before I shoot you too.”

Damian smirks faintly.

“I’m the only person who can save your brother. From a technical standpoint, I control the Powerslide system. I created it, and only I can shut it down if the opportunity appears.”

His gaze sharpens.

“You won’t be doing that. Which means it’s in your best interest to be my ally.”

“If I kill him, the race ends forever,” North snaps. “No one will give orders. No one will keep murdering people. He deserves it. So why should I spare him?”

“You’re right. He deserves it,” Damian agrees. “But you won’t kill him tonight. You’ll only create new problems.”

He gestures casually toward the cameras and guards North hadn’t noticed at first.

“Put the gun down, North,” he adds more quietly.

“All I ever do is cause problems,” North mutters bitterly. “Nothing new there. So shut up and leave me alone.”

“Let’s think logically,” Damian continues calmly. “You pull the trigger and miss. The guards react instantly to the gunshot. After a few minutes of chaotic pursuit, they catch you.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“And what do you think Hwang will do when he realizes that you, the man he wants dead, know all his dirty secrets?”

His voice lowers.

“That will bring consequences—for you, for your brother, and most likely for Nattawat as well. Stop. You need to act smarter than this. This is not an enemy you can afford to rush. We need a strategy.”

“We?” North scoffs suspiciously. “So you’re on the side of good now?”

“No. I’m on no one’s side. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are relative concepts. Am I a villain? Quite possibly. A hero? Definitely not.”

His voice turns colder.

“My position in this situation is simple: I will protect what must not be harmed. And if necessary, I will destroy my own father to achieve that.”

He shrugs slightly.

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Nattawat?” North asks quietly.

“Nattawat.”

“Why do you want to protect him?”

Damian is silent for a moment.

“He reminds me of the closest person I ever had,” he finally says. “Someone who is no longer alive.”

His gaze drifts toward the mansion gates.

“Sometimes he seems like a reckless boy. But when you look into his eyes, there’s an unbelievable strength there. He’s a man who fears nothing in this world.”

He pauses.

“Nothing except losing your brother.”

A faint smile touches his lips.

“For some reason, I believe those two might actually lead each other to the end alive.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re safe,” North mutters. “Nuthwang won’t stop until he kills us. And that means he’ll step over his own son to do it.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Damian nods slowly. “Blood ties won’t stop him.”

Movement near the mansion draws their attention. One of the guards steps behind the judge, shielding him.

North exhales sharply, realizing the moment for a clean shot is gone.

In a few seconds the man will disappear behind the towering gates.

“He killed my family… and Pond,” North whispers through clenched teeth. “I hate him so much.”

“He raped and killed my mother,” Damian replies with a casual shrug. “So trust me, I have reasons to despise him as well. But patience. This isn’t the moment to play the avenger.”

“There’s so much blood on his hands,” North mutters. “And now he wants to kill my brother. I can’t just wait for that. I have to do something.”

“It’s funny,” Damian says thoughtfully, exhaling slowly. “We both want to protect someone. And yet we’re completely powerless.”

He looks back toward the gates.

“There’s very little we can do right now.”

“You’re right,” North says bitterly. “At least you’re a smart bastard. I’m just useless.”

His arm slowly drops, the gun lowering as the man he hates disappears from view.

“My whole life Norawit has been cleaning up my messes,” he continues quietly. “I only bring him trouble. Even now, when he needs protection the most, I can’t do anything.”

Damian watches him silently.

“You were always right about me,” North whispers hoarsely. “Calling me stupid. Worthless.”

His shoulders lift weakly.

“What kind of brother can’t protect the person he loves most? What kind of boyfriend can’t love properly? What kind of friend ruins everyone’s life?”

He laughs without humor.

“What am I even good for if I can’t do anything for them?”

Another shrug.

“I don’t know either. My existence is pointless. I’m already dead inside. So why keep clinging to this empty shell?”

His voice drops to a whisper.

“I’m just a brainless addict with a broken mind. The world would probably be better off without me.”

He suddenly raises the gun and presses the barrel to his temple, staring straight ahead with empty eyes.

Lim’s eyes widen in shock. He shakes his head faintly, as if refusing to believe what he’s seeing. He never thought this guy was capable of something this bold, but right now North looks frighteningly determined. His index finger slides slowly along the trigger as if he’s considering pulling it, his grip tightening around the handle.

His desperation must have reached its limit if he’s ready to take a step like this.

All he wants is to be useful, to matter somehow, but he doesn't understand what he can possibly do. To him, the only real solution now seems to be disappearing from this world. It would end the pain. It would put an end to his worthless existence.

But as long as there is even one person in your life who is willing to fight for you, death is never the answer.

"I don't want to be a problem anymore," North says quietly, almost under his breath, and suddenly his eyes fill with tears. "I don't want the people I love to associate me only with pain and trouble. I don't want them to pity me like I'm some helpless child. I don't want them running around after me as if I can't do anything on my own. I don't want to be this pathetic."

His voice trembles.

"I disgust myself because I let him protect me like that. He shouldn't have to. My whole life I've only wanted one thing—for Norawit to be proud of me. But what have I done to deserve that? Nothing. I'm just the source of his constant pain. I'm his brother, and yet I hurt him more than anyone else ever has."

His grip on the gun tightens.

"He was happy when I stepped aside and let him live his own life. I hate admitting it, but it's true. He was better off without me. Then he met Nattawat, and look at him… my brother was happy. He was shining. He loved someone. He was carefree. My existence only brings him disappointment, fear, and paranoia. How is that fair?"

"You still have the power to change that," Lim says calmly, studying him with a careful gaze. "You're all each other has. So how could it possibly be too late?"

He pauses.

"Dying like this is stupid. Killing yourself won't make his life easier. He loves you."

"He does," North whispers. "But that love hurts him. Maybe this is the only way to make things easier for him."

He presses the cold metal harder against his temple.

"Maybe he'll finally breathe freely when I'm gone. He won't have to worry about me all the time. He won't have to fix my problems, save me, run after me. And he won't have to keep being disappointed in me every time he gives me another chance."

His voice suddenly breaks into a shout.

"Because that's how it'll always be! Do you understand? Always!"

His words are swallowed by the roar of rain around them. He starts breathing in ragged bursts, gasping for air, his lips trembling uncontrollably.

Damian understands that this is the cry of a man whose life has broken him. So he simply keeps his hand ready in case he needs to stop him from pulling the trigger.

He doesn't want to watch a life end right in front of him.

Not because he's kind. Not because he's some hero.

But because that would be unbelievably stupid.

It would be the same as handing Hwang the victory.

"It'll always be like this because I'm a useless piece of shit," Titicharoenrak continues quietly. "I'm beyond fixing, and he keeps hoping I'll get better. But people don't change, Damian. We both know that. I'm not some exception."

A bitter smile curls on his lips.

"I keep lying to him. Telling him I'll feel better someday. That I'll quit all this. That I'll never touch drugs again. But damn it…"

He lets out a humorless laugh.

"I'm high right now."

He shakes his head slowly.

"I relapsed again. Even after I promised him."

His voice drops to a whisper.

"I know how my life ends. I'll drink myself to death or overdose one day. It's inevitable, because I'm destroying myself. Or more likely I'll die in one of those fights."

He taps the barrel lightly against his temple.

"What happens there is pure horror. My mind is a personal hell. Endless darkness whispering that I'm worthless. There's no helping me anymore. Time won't fix it. Therapists won't fix it. Pills won't fix it. Care won't fix it. Alcohol won't fix it. Coke won't fix it. Hurting myself won't fix it."

His voice grows softer.

"All I want is to return to a normal life. But I can't. Every single day I'm suffocating under this pain."

He swallows hard.

"I just want to stop feeling it. But the only way to make sure it never hurts again is to rip my soul out completely. Right? What else is there?"

His eyes lock onto Damian.

“Tell me something. How do you live like this? How do you walk through life so calmly, like nothing ever destroyed you?”

His voice grows sharper.

“You have pain too. I read those files. He killed your mother. You found her body. Then you grew up with a sadist who turned violence into a method of parenting. I know how he treated Night.”

He takes a shaky breath.

“So how did you learn to be this cold? What made you like this?”

Damian swallows hard, the knot in his throat suddenly suffocating.

No one had ever asked him that question before.

Usually people said other things to him.

What kind of monster are you?
How does the earth even carry a bastard like you?
Do you have even a drop of humanity?

But not this.

North was the first person to see something behind his cruelty. The first one to understand that there was a story behind it.

Cruel people aren’t born that way.

They’re made.

“You were broken by circumstances,” Lim finally says quietly, looking at him without blinking. “I was broken by a person.”

He exhales slowly.

“That’s not an excuse. I really am a monster. But the reason I seem so indifferent is simple—how I was raised.”

His voice remains calm.

“Every time I showed emotion, I was punished. So I learned to turn them off.”

For a moment he looks somewhere past North.

“For most of my life I believed I wasn’t human at all. Someone without a heart or a soul. I thought nothing could ever touch me… until I saw a pair of big eyes that reminded me of my mother.”

His voice softens slightly.

“And suddenly my heart started beating again.”

Titicharoenrak frowns.

“Nattawat woke something human in you?”

“Something like that.”

Damian shrugs faintly.

“He deserves to be protected. Don’t you think?”

Titicharoenrak studies him with confusion.

“I still don’t understand why you’re helping us. Why you’re protecting him. Why you took our side. Why you’re even standing here listening to me when I’m nothing to you.”

Damian takes a small step closer.

“Because I don’t want Hwang to break anyone else.”

His voice is quiet.

“He already destroyed you once. If you kill yourself now, he wins again. You understand that’s exactly what he wants, right?”

North lets out a bitter laugh.

“You stopped me from killing him, and now you won’t let me kill myself. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I can give you a chance to kill him,” Damian replies calmly. “If that’s really what you want.”

He pauses.

“But not here. Not now. This would put all of you at risk. Don’t drag your brother into this again. You can’t do that to him.”

His gaze hardens slightly.

“Your stupid death won’t fix anything. It’ll just break him even more.”

He watches North closely.

“You want him to live, don’t you?”

“More than anything in the world.”

“Then find the strength to fight.”

North shakes his head weakly.

“I don’t have any strength left. None. I’ve used it all.”

His voice cracks again.

“Why did he dig into all of this? I begged him not to. What was the point? Who’s better off now because of the truth?”

His breathing grows uneven.

“He’s broken. Nattawat is broken. And I… I just can’t anymore.”

His voice explodes into a desperate shout.

“Is revenge worth it?! Tell me! You kill people! You’ve lost people too! Is it worth it? Answer me, damn it!”

Damian watches the gun trembling in his hand.

Then he carefully places his palm over North’s.

Holding his gaze the entire time.

It’s easy to take the gun from him. North’s attention is completely captured by those cold blue eyes.

Slowly, calmly, Damian lowers their hands and gently slides the weapon from his freezing fingers. Only then does he finally blink and glance away.

For the first time in a long while, something inside him feels uneasy.

He has seen many things over the years. He has witnessed horrifying cruelty and committed plenty of it himself.

But looking at this broken boy… something tightens faintly in his chest.

It feels almost like sympathy.

North is in so much pain that he’s ready to disappear forever.

And that feeling is painfully familiar.

There were many times in Damian’s life when he wanted the same thing. When the man who raised him turned his world into hell.

That helplessness.

The terrifying realization that you are dying inside, yet completely powerless to save yourself. No one else can save you either.

At first you fight desperately.

Then eventually you accept it.

And after acceptance comes surrender.

All that remains is to drift with the current and slowly drown in it.

Damian knew that feeling better than most.

Many times he had thought about ending his own life. But somehow he never found the courage.

Strange, considering how little he valued it.

Still, he had always believed that if someone died by their own hand, it should be for a reason.

And he had never found one.

No one would mourn him anyway.

That was what a truly worthless life looked like.

But escaping pain… that was a reason.

If he had ever reached his true limit, maybe he would have done it.

That's why he understands North now.

Desperation is speaking through him.

North is standing on the thin line where a person truly might pull the trigger.

He thinks his death would solve everything.

But in reality, it would be the most meaningless death imaginable.

Maybe it would bring him peace.

But perhaps he deserves to try living one more time.

Just once more.

Right now he's vulnerable—weak from despair and drugs. When his mind clears, he might regret even thinking about this.

Usually his brother would be the one standing beside him in moments like this.

But now North himself needs someone to lean on.

The support he once had in Norawit is gone.

And so he teeters between extremes, lost and alone.

No father. No mother. No one who loves him the way Nattawat loves his older brother.

And Lim knows exactly what it's like when loneliness is the only companion you have.

He exhales deeply.

Then, surprising even himself, he gently takes North by the back of the neck and pulls him closer.

He doesn't hug him. They're strangers, after all.

An embrace would invade a kind of closeness neither of them likes.

And he doesn't hold him by force.

There's no need.

North simply leans his forehead against Damian's shoulder without resistance.

He stands there silently, breathing heavily as if he might break down at any moment.

The last of his strength is cracking.

And he accepts this silent support without protest.

How desperate does someone have to be to lean on the shoulder of their enemy?

Damian had never pitied anyone before.

Never tried to comfort someone.

Never wanted to give anyone even the smallest piece of care.

He was always cold.

But now his heart trembles ever so slightly.

For a few brief seconds, somewhere deep inside his dark soul, something almost human awakens.

The boy standing beside him, swallowing his pain and stubbornly refusing to cry, is not guilty of anything.

Years ago something he saw with his own eyes shattered him.

And in that moment he buried a part of himself forever.

How could anyone blame him for that weakness?

He is both incredibly strong and terribly fragile.

Right now his engine has simply stalled.

Maybe he's right. Maybe he can't be saved from the swamp he's sinking in.

But he still has to pull himself together.

There is potential inside him—sleeping, but still alive.

He's stronger than he thinks.

Now everything depends on one decision.

Whether he gives up… or keeps living.

No one ever asks people if they're ready for hardship.

You just have to keep fighting.

Right now only North can decide how he will take the next sharp turn in his life.

He can slam the brakes and end everything with a bullet to the head.

The easy choice for someone who's broken.

Or he can gather what little strength he has left and take control of his life again.

Like a controlled drift—not literally, but figuratively.

And that decision will determine not only his own fate…

but his brother's as well.

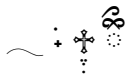
"I don't know what revenge is truly worth," Damian finally says quietly. "But I know that being blinded by it never leads anywhere good."

He meets North's eyes.

"Killing your enemy from the shadows is easy. But there's no pride in that."

His voice is steady.

"If you really want to defeat someone… you do it in front of their eyes. Like a worthy opponent."



It seemed that from the very moment North had nearly killed himself in a moment of stupidity and then returned home, he had barely moved or breathed at all.

His own weakness frightened him.

For a long time he sat on the floor beside his bed, staring at the very folder Lim had handed to Nattawat, trying to find the strength within himself to keep living. He had taken it so he could carefully untangle the twisted story hidden inside. The damn thing had passed from hand to hand like some unwanted trophy—first from Nattawat to Norawit, then to his younger brother, and from there it was meant to end up with Night.

Everything was in it.

The whole truth that not everyone wanted to know.

He had already read it from beginning to end, over and over again, and now he didn't even want to touch it. The pages felt as if they burned his hands. Knowing the truth would never bring his parents back, and it certainly wouldn't heal the damage done to his mind. All it took was brushing against that painful trigger, and everything inside him collapsed.

After that conversation with Damian, the one who had found him in such a miserable state, something inside North had shifted. It had been the kind of kick he needed, brutal but necessary. He kept replaying Damian's words in his head.

That bastard was smart.

Smart enough to force him to think about things he had spent years avoiding.

Titicharoenrak no longer wanted to talk to anyone. Instead, he was trying to reach the quiet voice buried somewhere inside himself. He just wanted to extend a hand to his own broken soul and try to change something for the better.

Maybe not his own life.

But if he could gather what little strength he had left and stop being a burden to Norawit, that alone would be a step forward.

Unfortunately, he couldn't even hear the faintest breath of life within himself anymore.

It felt as though something inside him had already died.

His older brother, even when the world knocked him down, always found the strength to get back up and fight again. But North couldn't.

Not this time.

He wasn't like his brother.

If anything, learning the truth had only sharpened Norawit's hunger for revenge, made him more desperate to see it through. North, on the other hand, had gone quiet. The moment of rage had passed, leaving behind nothing but a suffocating heaviness.

Yet in that moment he truly had wanted to kill that bastard with his own hands, if only to give Norawit the peace he had been waiting for.

Of course, realizing who was responsible for the deaths of the two most important people in his life hurt like hell.

But something else hit almost just as hard.

The fact that all this time he had been falling in love with that man's son.

It felt like a knockout blow.

Their relationship had been a mistake from the very beginning. Now he understood that perfectly well. He had never been worthy of Night. That man was far too good for someone like him. Someone like Night deserved better.

It was foolish to ever believe he could reach that level.

Night had never been the most open person when it came to emotions. He was reserved, guarded. The two of them could circle the same conversation for weeks without getting anywhere because emotionally they were painfully alike.

Night had endured a brutal childhood too, one full of cruelty and pain.

So why had he tied himself to someone who was nothing but trouble for everyone around him?

It was wrong.

No matter how strong the pull between them was, he never should have allowed himself that weakness. North was the kind of person who dragged others down with him, while Night needed someone who could help him climb out of the darkness.

That had been obvious from the start.

But God, he had wanted, just once, to feel happy.

And for a while it seemed like he had managed it.

Now everything had flipped upside down. The truth that had come to light had thrown him straight back into the past—to a time when he was a small, helpless child.

A broken child.

Deep in his chest he felt a graveyard cold spreading slowly through his body.

Maybe it meant that everything alive inside him was already gone.

Was it even possible to save himself?

Probably not.

Still, he had to pull himself together one last time and try to keep living.

For now, his main goal was to protect the people close to him from the shrapnel of this explosion happening inside his own mind.

To dull the pain, he turned to the only method he knew that could shut down every feeling completely.

It was a terrible method.

But it worked.

He broke his abstinence.

His voluntary decision to stay away from crack hadn't lasted very long, but for him it had still been a small victory. He had tried, really tried, to suppress the wild craving clawing at him.

This relapse had been inevitable.

Only a few hours after learning the truth, he had already taken drugs again.

The stash he bought was enough for a couple of lines, just enough to disconnect from the world for a while. But when he returned home on autopilot, North realized it wasn't enough.

The pain hadn't disappeared.

If anything, it had gotten worse.

So much worse that in a surge of despair he had nearly put a bullet through his own forehead.

So he pulled out the rest of his small remaining supply, hoping to chase that fleeting euphoria.

Cocaine's effect was brief. The high came bright and intense but faded quickly.

Right now, though, even that was enough.

For some reason the amount that used to satisfy him before didn't seem to work anymore. He straightened the thin white lines on the table with a plastic card, supporting his forehead with his palm.

A sharp pain pulsed in his temples, making him wince, but he had grown used to that sensation.

North repeated the familiar routine, inhaling the powder through his nose before leaning back.

He rested against the bed, letting his heavy head fall onto the mattress as he stared blankly at the ceiling. The muted sound of the television slowly melted into a dull, distant hum while his body began reacting to the drug several long minutes later.

There was always the same sequence.

First the slight burning sensation in his nose. Then the sudden watering of his eyes. He wiped them with the back of his hand and continued staring at the ceiling, waiting for the bright aftertaste of the high.

A few minutes passed.

A sharp tingling appeared in the upper part of his head—unpleasant at first, but it faded quickly.

And then… nothing.

As if he hadn't taken anything at all.

Usually those brief moments were enough to reach bliss.

But not now.

It felt like it wasn't nearly enough. When no effect came, he repeated the process again. Another long line from what remained of the cocaine. Another deep inhale.

This time the tingling shot through his skull instantly, so sharp that he grimaced.

He sat back in the same position, staring up at the ceiling again, arms resting by his sides and legs stretched out.

A minute later a strange weakness spread through his body, growing stronger as the drug seeped into his bloodstream.

It wasn't quite the sensation he had expected, but it wasn't bad either.

A pleasant relaxation washed over him.

He closed his eyes, savoring the feeling.

Peace.

Finally, it seemed, the pain in his chest was quieting.

No suffocating pressure.

No aching emptiness.

Nothing mattered anymore.

It had been so long since he had felt like this.

Once upon a time he had relaxed this way almost every evening. Just a little, but often.

His heart suddenly began pounding wildly. A wave of heat spread through his body.

Sweat beaded across his forehead and he licked his dry lips.

When he opened his eyes again, he knew the intoxication had arrived.

The colors around him sharpened. Sounds grew louder. His body felt weightless and numb.

He drifted into a state of overwhelming satisfaction, tricked into believing the pain had faded. He could almost physically feel his pupils expanding like giant planets, and he would have sworn he could hear the drug dissolving in his blood.

Time slipped away.

Minutes passed. Or maybe hours.

He sat there unmoving, staring at the white ceiling where a carved chandelier hung with tiny crystal pendants, drifting farther and farther from reality.

His limbs barely belonged to him anymore.

His arms hung uselessly at his sides. His legs wouldn't even move.

Yet after a while that numb pleasure gave way to a sudden exhaustion and complete apathy toward everything around him.

A strong pain began tightening around the back of his head and forehead like a metal band.

Something in his chest pressed inward so hard that breathing became difficult.

It felt as if someone were squeezing his lungs.

His heartbeat pounded in his temples while a strange chill spread through his body.

He felt cold—yet his skin burned.

Weak, painful spasms flickered through his arms and legs. He closed his eyes again as a heavy wave of drowsiness pulled him down.

The sounds around him faded, as though he were sinking into a deep sleep.

All he could hear now was the sound of his own heart, marking the rhythm of his life like an old clock.

A beat. Silence. Another beat.

North sank deeper into the dark corners of his mind.

There, an eleven-year-old boy with black hair pulled out an old projector. He blew the dust from it and slid in a reel of film, his own life.

The tape began to spin.

The machine hummed softly, replaying the most beautiful memories he had.

The first thing that appeared was the bright, beautiful smile of his brother.

The closest, most important person in his world.

The one who had been beside him from the very beginning and had never left him alone.

Norawit had held his hand from the day he was born until now.

One life shared between two people.

One soul.

One heart.

In childhood they almost never fought.

Only later had things begun to change.

A beat. Silence. Another beat.

He remembered a family trip to Thailand. They had sat beneath a huge cherry tree known as Thai Sakura in a green meadow, talking about nonsense like ordinary schoolboys. Hundreds of tiny blossoms hung overhead, their petals falling in the wind.

They tangled in his brother’s hair.

He couldn’t help smiling when he thought of him. The corners of his lips lifted on their own.

That man made his life better.

It was terrifying to imagine what that life would have been without him.

Norawit gave him happiness without ever asking for anything in return.

So why couldn’t he give the same back?

It should have been so simple.

A beat. Silence. Another beat.

Norawit had given him so much care, so much warmth.

Back at the orphanage they had loved a book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. His brother used to read it aloud when North refused to speak.

And now North realized something.

Norawit had always been his Little Prince.

And he himself had been the Fox.

Because Norawit had tamed him.

Taught him how to live again.

Fragments of familiar lines from the book surfaced in his mind, words he had heard countless times in his brother's voice.

"I'm looking for friends. What does it mean—to tame someone?"

"It's something that has been forgotten," said the Fox. "It means to create ties."

"Ties?"

"Exactly. Right now you're just a little boy to me, like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I don't need you. And you don't need me either. I'm just a fox to you, like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, we'll need each other. You'll be the only one in the world for me. And I'll be the only one in the world for you…"

Norawit had never denied him attention, even though he himself desperately needed it.

Back then he had truly tamed him, like a frightened little animal, because North had no idea how to survive in the adult world.

For Norawit, his younger brother had always been the first priority.

The center of his entire life.

Until everything began to fall apart.

"I'll cry for you," said the Fox.

"It's your own fault," the Little Prince said. "I never wanted to hurt you. You asked me to tame you."

"Yes, of course," said the Fox. "But I'll still cry."

"Yes."

"So you gain nothing."

“I do,” said the Fox. “Because of the color of the wheat fields.”

North knew he had hurt him many times.

But it had never been intentional.

He was simply that kind of person—difficult, problematic, often painfully stupid.

Most of their hardships had been his fault.

And yet no matter how much pain Norawit endured, North had never seen him cry.

His brother never allowed himself that weakness.

He knew he had to be strong—for him.

A reliable support. A protector.

And he had done it perfectly.

For years he had carried both their lives on his shoulders.

Everyone around them knew the truth.

Without Norawit, North wouldn’t have lasted a single day.

“Goodbye,” said the Little Prince.

“Goodbye,” said the Fox. “Here is my secret. It is very simple: one sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

“What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the Little Prince repeated.

“It is the time you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important.”

“It is the time I spent on my rose…”

“People have forgotten this truth,” said the Fox. “But you must never forget it. You become responsible forever for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose.”

“I am responsible for my rose…”

A beat. Silence. Another beat.

In his mind he could hear the soft rustle of green leaves in the warm wind, the distant roar of a waterfall, the echo of a heartbeat in the chest he used to rest against.

And the scent of pine and fresh air.

Ojai.

The place where he had once been truly, endlessly happy.

All his friends had been there with him—Pond, Pahn, Phuwin, Satang, Nattawat.

Norawit.

And, of course, Night.

The man who had given him his first love, and a comfort so powerful it had felt like home.

He had always been gentle with him—careful, almost painfully so—placing his feelings above everything else. What they had could hardly be called a normal relationship. Sometimes they were more like friends; other times they were lovers. They tried to understand each other, to build something fragile but real, a connection rooted in trust. It was hard work for both of them.

But that trip had changed everything. In some quiet, inevitable way, it had become a turning point in their lives, because somewhere along the road they had allowed themselves to fall in love.

They would take one timid step forward and two back, stumbling, hesitating, but somehow growing closer with every passing day. And no matter what the future held for them, they both understood one simple truth: they would always remain important to each other.

A beat. Silence. Another beat.

A kaleidoscope of happy memories spins wildly through his mind, whirling faster and faster until he can't help the soft smile that spreads across his face.

It's ridiculous.

His chest aches again, yet the smile refuses to fade. The pain feels strangely gentle, almost comforting. Maybe his life really is a complete mess—but at least once, he had felt truly happy.

The realization makes something inside him tremble, warm and fragile. A single tear slips slowly down his temple, born from a moment of unbearable vulnerability.

North feels his hands twitch in weak spasms, his fingers trembling slightly. He doesn't understand what's happening to his body. His blood pressure spikes sharply; a pounding headache blooms behind his eyes, and nausea rises in his throat. His vision fades in and out, his eyelids growing heavier with every second.

This time the drug works differently. The pleasant haze fades almost immediately, far quicker than usual. The brief warmth disappears, replaced by something darker.

The side effects come crashing down all at once.

First in his mind.

The depression he had been trying so desperately to escape surges back to the surface, sharper than ever. Anxiety coils tightly in his chest, panic clawing its way up his throat. The swing in his emotions is violent, overwhelming—so strong that the pain he had tried to hide from now floods him with merciless force.

He forces himself to lift his heavy head and tries to sit upright.

But the sudden wave of weakness hits him instantly.

His body collapses to the side, and his eyes fall shut again.

A beat. Silence. Another beat.

Fear.

A terrible, suffocating fear begins to spread through him. He understands what he's done, but he can't even call for help. He never meant for this to happen.

But now it's too late.

His body and mind are sinking into something that feels dangerously close to a coma. He has no control over himself anymore. All he can feel is the creeping emptiness and the deep darkness slowly swallowing him whole.

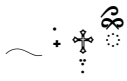
The loneliness he has always feared most suddenly becomes unbearable.

He wants to whimper.

It feels like he's dying—and in this moment, he's completely alone. He can't even tell his brother one last time how much he loves him.

And that is the most terrible thing of all: this hollow, devastating emptiness in absolute solitude.

A beat. Silence. And then…he feels nothing at all.



North never saw the moment Night arrived at his apartment.

For nearly two hours the guy had been trying to reach him by phone, but North didn't answer, he had gone to see his father. In the end Night decided not to wait for an invitation and simply came over. The door wasn't locked, so he walked in without any trouble.

Something immediately felt wrong.

The apartment was far too quiet.

Usually rock music blasted through the place loud enough to shake the walls, and Titicharoenrak could sleep through it without a problem. But now the silence was almost frightening.

Just as he had feared, something was definitely not right.

He found North on the floor beside the bed, unconscious and frighteningly pale.

His mind stayed cold and clear, refusing to give in to panic. There was no time for emotions, not when every second mattered and he had no idea how long North had been lying there.

The reason became obvious the moment he saw the traces of drugs on the coffee table.

Night called 911 immediately. He slapped North's cheeks, splashed water on his face again and again for nearly five minutes, trying to bring him back to consciousness, until the paramedics finally arrived.

At the hospital they told him it was a moderate overdose, but they had managed to stabilize him. He was given intensive detox treatment and placed under strict medical supervision.

He would feel terrible for several hours, but at least he was alive.

Right now, nothing else mattered.

Norawit rushed to the hospital the moment Night called. Night hadn't explained everything over the phone and only told him what happened once Norawit arrived in person.

To say he was horrified would be an understatement.

Nothing like this had ever happened to his brother before, even though North had messed with drugs for years. Of course Norawit had always feared something like this might happen one day, but North had said he quit.

Norawit had believed him.

Apparently the truth they had discovered had hit him far harder than anyone expected. And it had come out in the worst possible way—careless, sudden, while he was drunk.

That was exactly why Norawit hadn't wanted to tell him immediately. He had been waiting for the right moment.

But instead, the truth had slipped out.

Still… maybe it was for the best.

Finding the courage to say it had been nearly impossible, but sooner or later they would have had to tell him. Something like that couldn't stay hidden forever, especially when it concerned all of them.

The doctor in charge said North's condition was stable, but visitors weren't allowed yet.

So Norawit waited.

One hour.

Two.

Three.

All one hundred and eighty minutes while North slept peacefully in a VIP room in one of the best clinics in Los Angeles.

Everything was almost under control now, but the shock of it still weighed heavily on him, and on all their friends.

He had woken up earlier to a frantic phone call, barely understanding what was happening or why someone wouldn't let him sleep.

His phone rang again and again like it had gone insane. His hangover vanished instantly the moment he heard the words:

"North is in the hospital."

Now he sat alone in a long, empty corridor, waiting to see his brother alive and well.

It was quiet.

Late.

Probably past three in the morning.

There were no other visitors, barely any doctors around. And strangely enough, the air didn't even smell like disinfectant or medicine—just… clean.

Lost in thought, Norawit stared at the pale green tiles on the floor, tracing the strange swirling patterns with his eyes just to distract himself from the endless waiting.

Then he heard footsteps approaching from the left.

They sounded surprisingly loud in the overwhelming silence.

He didn't lift his head.

Someone sat down on the bench beside him, the seat dipping softly under the stranger's weight.

Norawit's gaze drifted downward—and the moment he saw the visitor's shoes, his heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

Black sneakers.

Heavy.

Massive platform soles.

A model he knew all too well.

Only one person in his life liked shoes that heavy.

Norawit exhaled quietly and leaned back against the wall, a strange wave of relief washing over him.

The last thing he expected was for Nattawat to come to the hospital—especially this late, considering their complicated situation.

He must have just found out.

They weren't exactly together.

But they weren't truly apart either.

It was strange.

Without saying a word, they had both given each other space and gone their separate ways for a while. Yet now Norawit felt unbelievably grateful that Nattawat had come anyway. Just his presence made things feel a little easier.

Nattawat didn't say anything at first.

He simply sat beside him in silence for several minutes, nervously bouncing his knee.

It was obvious how worried he was.

You could hear it even in the rhythm of his breathing.

Norawit glanced at him briefly, studying the elegant line of his profile.

God, how Norawit missed him.

Right now he wanted nothing more than to grab him and kiss him—desperately, greedily—but he couldn't.

This was a test for both of them.

It wasn't only difficult for Norawit to accept everything that had happened. It was just as hard for Nattawat.

And clearly, they were both suffering even more without each other.

Norawit looked away again and ran a hand through his hair.

They were sitting less than twenty centimeters apart.

Yet it felt as if they were standing on opposite sides of a massive abyss, both terrified to jump.

Because if they rushed things, it could break them all over again.

The tension between them hung heavy in the air.

Then suddenly Norawit flinched.

Nattawat had placed his hand over Norawit's, which was resting loosely on the bench.

For a moment Norawit almost didn't believe it. He glanced down just to be sure.

A sharp warmth shot through his skin.

The sensation spread from the crown of his head to the tips of his fingers, making the tiny hairs on his arms stand up.

Everything inside him seemed to come back to life from that simple touch.

God, how much he missed this.

The closeness.

And especially the smell of him.

Nattawat gently brushed his thumb across Norawit's hand before carefully threading their fingers together.

Firm.

But gentle.

Enough for Norawit to understand why he was there.

Nattawat didn't need to say much.

He just wanted to give him a little peace, a tiny step toward him.

Norawit exhaled heavily through his nose and finally allowed himself to accept the support.

He tried to stay calm, but his chest rose and fell with deep, uneven breaths.

For them, this gesture spoke louder than words.

It chased away the storm of anxiety that had been raging inside Norawit all night.

Nattawat knew that.

He was the only one who did, besides North.

Even with their so-called “time-out,” Nattawat understood one thing: there was no way he could leave Norawit alone during something like this.

That would have been cruel.

If Norawit had faced this alone, he might have completely fallen apart.

So Nattawat came anyway, despite the risk. Seeing each other like this could easily make things worse.

But Norawit accepted the help.

He clung to Nattawat’s presence just as tightly as Nattawat now held his fingers.

“How is he?” Nattawat asked quietly.

“He’s okay. Thanks to your brother,” Norawit replied.

“Where’s Night?”

“Probably downstairs. He was nervous. Went out for a smoke.”

A brief pause.

“And you?” Nattawat asked carefully.

“You really want to hear that?” Norawit scoffed softly.

“I heard you’ve been drinking,” Nattawat said, frowning slightly.

“Yeah. Screwed up again,” Norawit nodded slowly. “Nothing surprising. Looks like ruining our lives runs in the family.”

“It’s understandable.”

“You feel terrible too, but you’re not drowning yourself in alcohol,” Norawit replied. “Don’t try to justify me. I don’t deserve that. I wish I had your willpower.”

“I don’t have any willpower,” Nattawat said quietly. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

He shrugged lightly.

“I only came for five minutes. I just thought… maybe you needed someone to do this.”

“To do what?”

“To hold your hand,” Nattawat said simply. “There’s no one else left who would.”

Norawit lowered his gaze.

“I was worried about how you’d handle this alone.”

“Thank you for coming,” he whispered.

“I meant what I said before,” Nattawat continued softly. “No matter what happens… I’ll follow you anywhere. Always. Because you matter to me.”

“And you matter to me,” Norawit said, looking at him with quiet sadness. “Nattawat… how are you?”

“Burning with shame every second,” Nattawat replied, lowering his head. “Feels like living in hell.”

“You’re not responsible for who your father is.”

“This isn’t the time to talk about that,” Nattawat said gently. “You need to think about your brother. And about yourself.”

He gave a small, shy smile.

“Take all the time you need. I’ll wait.”

He hesitated, biting his lip.

“Just… don’t be surprised if one night I show up under your window singing a ridiculous serenade and begging you to come back to me.”

Norawit let out a quiet laugh—the first real laugh he’d had in a long time.

Nattawat smiled when he heard it.

“I almost forgot what that sounded like,” he murmured. “Feels like it’s been forever.”

“You’re unbearable, you know that?” Norawit said, smiling despite himself.

“I just love your laugh.”

“Nattawat…”

“Too much?” Nattawat grimaced playfully. “Sorry. I’m trying. It’s just… hard to stay away from you.”

“I understand that,” Norawit whispered. “I miss you too.”

He leaned his head against the wall.

“But we still need to talk. Really talk. We can’t just leave things like this forever.”

“You’re right,” Nattawat said quietly. “This… limbo is killing me.”

“We’re not together,” Norawit murmured. “But we didn’t end things either.”

Nattawat hesitated.

“Are you ready…” he asked softly, “to end it?”

“That’s not the question for me,” Norawit replied after a moment.

“What is?”

“The question is whether I’m ready to close my eyes to everything… if it means being with you.”

Nattawat looked at him, hope flickering in his eyes.

“And what’s the answer?” he whispered.

Norawit inhaled.

“I—”

“Mr. Titicharoenrak?”

A doctor stepped out of North’s room.

“Your brother is awake. You can see him now.”

Norawit’s gaze darted between the door and Nattawat, clearly torn.

He wanted to run to his brother immediately.

But ending their conversation like this felt wrong.

Nattawat had waited for him.

This was the first time they had been alone together since everything fell apart.

Between them, a fragile thread had appeared again, a small sign that maybe not everything was lost.

They missed each other just as desperately.

And that mattered.

Norawit had feared their feelings might have cracked under the weight of everything.

But they still had the same overwhelming power over both of them.

Because right now, as Nattawat sat beside him and held his hand, those horrifying images from the past that had haunted him for the past week didn’t appear in his mind.

Yet the choice wasn’t simple.

Norawit felt torn between two people who both meant everything to him.

That was why Nattawat made the decision for him.

This wasn't the moment to force Norawit to think about anything except North.

He slowly stood, lowering the cap over his face. Then he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to the crown of Norawit's light brown hair. For a second he allowed himself to breathe in the familiar scent, and the feeling that followed was steady and warm.

Like coming home.

This conversation wasn't over. He knew it.

And because of that, a gentle smile touched his lips.

"Go to your brother, Norawit. One day you waited for me. Now it's my turn," he whispered, before turning away.

His footsteps echoed down the hospital corridor as he walked toward the exit with an unhurried, almost relaxed stride. Each step felt like a blow straight to Norawit's heart, because he missed him so desperately.

For a moment it felt like Nattawat was leaving him all over again, just like that evening. But this time Norawit understood why he had done it.

And strangely enough, it didn't hurt.

A faint smile appeared on his lips.

Norawit moved silently through the hospital room, careful not to make a sound. The interior was done in calm beige tones with dark blue accents. He glanced around quickly and let out a quiet breath of gratitude.

Night had taken care of everything.

North was in one of the best rooms the hospital had to offer. It was peaceful here. The only sound was the steady, mechanical beeping of a monitor near the bed.

Rooms like this were usually reserved for the rich and famous, so it felt strange to be standing here. The place was bright, comfortable—almost homey. There was even a small couch for family members to rest on, and fresh flowers sat on the bedside table.

The only things that reminded you it was still a hospital were the medical equipment and the doctors passing through the hallways outside.

North was sitting against the pillows, leaning back slightly, watching the fine rain outside the window.

He didn't notice Norawit right away.

His gaze was distant, unfocused, as if his thoughts were somewhere far away. The sight of him like that made Norawit's chest tighten painfully.

His skin looked pale and sickly. Dark circles lay heavy beneath his eyes. Blue veins throbbed faintly at his temples from the fluctuations in blood pressure. His lips were cracked and bitten.

He looked fragile.

So fragile that Norawit had the overwhelming urge to shield him from the entire world.

A faint tremor still ran through his hands. His fingers shook slightly as he opened and closed them. Through the catheter in his vein, a clear solution dripped slowly into his bloodstream.

Norawit cleared his throat softly to catch his attention and sat down beside the bed.

North turned toward him, and guilt immediately appeared on his face.

His dark eyebrow, shaved slightly at the edge, drew together, and his eyes grew even sadder.

"Norr…" he whispered hoarsely, clearing his throat again. "Nor… I…"

"Easy," Norawit said gently. "Calm down. You need rest right now, not stress."

"Yeah, but…"

"How do you feel?" Norawit asked quietly.

"Honestly?"

"Of course."

"Like shit."

Norawit nodded slowly, staring ahead for a long moment.

If it hadn't been for Night, this moment might never have happened at all.

He knew the overdose hadn't been a deliberate attempt to end his life, but it had still been a brush with death. And that realization was terrifying.

His younger brother had been running from a reality that hurt too much.

After weeks of sobriety, he'd lost control again and misjudged his limits.

Norawit understood that all too well. He had lost control with alcohol more than once himself. But drugs were far more dangerous.

He moved closer and carefully sat on the edge of the bed.

North immediately curled inward, shrinking slightly, his head lowering as if expecting punishment for his reckless mistake.

At least he understood what had happened.

The guilt and shame were written all over him, and that was a good sign. It meant he realized how close he had come to dying.

Norawit leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

He gently stroked his hair, pulling him into a soft embrace the way a mother would comfort her child. His movements were careful and warm, trying to show that there was no anger in him at all.

North froze for a few seconds.

This was the last reaction he had expected.

But Norawit, as always, managed to hit him straight in the heart.

Slowly he placed his arms around Norawit's back and leaned into the warmth of his chest, listening to the familiar heartbeat echoing beneath it.

The closest sound he knew.

The safest place.

No matter how many people cared about him—friends, Night—no one could ever become his safe place the way his brother had always been.

Only Norawit could make him feel needed.

No matter how much of a pain in the ass North could be, Norawit was always there.

He defended him, justified him, protected him, helped him, saved him again and again.

That was love.

North wished he could give him the chance to be weak for once—to protect him instead, to finally let that wounded heart in Norawit's chest rest.

But he didn't know how.

"You're alive," Norawit whispered softly, pressing a kiss to his hair.

"Yeah," North said with a bitter smile.

"You scared all of us."

"And that's it?" North asked, raising an eyebrow faintly. "You're not even going to yell at me for being an idiot? I was expecting that. You always lose your temper when I pull stupid shit

like this."

"I'm not wasting energy on that," Norawit replied gently, pulling back a little. "That's not what you need right now. I don't want you feeling alone and fighting through this by yourself. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been selfish and drowned myself in alcohol while forgetting that you needed me."

"Norawit," North said softly, shaking his head. "You don't have to revolve your life around me. I'm not eleven anymore."

"You've been holding my hand since that horrible day," he continued. "You forgot that you have your own life too. That's not fair."

"I don't know how to live any other way," Norawit admitted quietly. "You've always been the center of my world."

"Until Nattawat appeared," North said with a small smile.

Norawit blinked in surprise.

Why would he say that? Did he really think he had become less important?

"That's not—don't say that."

"We both know I'm right," North replied, gently rubbing his fingers. "And it's not a bad thing. It's normal, Nor. You love him. The way our parents loved each other."

He sighed softly.

"He's a good person. That's enough for me. At first I was skeptical about you two. I didn't think it would get this serious. But I changed my mind."

He looked at his brother.

"You'd turn the whole world upside down for him, wouldn't you?"

Norawit stayed silent.

"He's done more for you in this short time than I have in my entire life," North continued quietly. "I'm grateful to him for that. For making you feel like you're the most amazing person in the world. Because you are."

"I couldn't give you that feeling. And I regret it."

"North, don't say that," Norawit insisted softly.

"I've had a lot of time to think lately," North said. "Everything that happened… it reset something in me. It's like I was asleep before, but now I finally woke up."

He gave a faint, sad smile.

“I’ve been a terrible brother.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Please don’t deny it,” North said quietly. “Deep down you’ve thought it too. You’d just never say it out loud.”

He looked away.

“And when my friends said it before, it pissed me off. Now I understand they were right.”

His voice softened.

“I don’t deserve you.”

Norawit frowned.

“I’m alive only because you fought for me all these years,” North continued. “But now… I don’t want you worrying about me more than I worry about you.”

“I know this is hard—”

“You don’t fully understand,” North interrupted gently. “Honestly, no one does. Not even me.”

He stared ahead.

“I’m trying to climb out of this, but it feels like I’m drowning deeper.”

He looked back at Norawit.

“I don’t want to drag you down with me.”

Then his expression darkened slightly.

“I don’t want Nuthwang to take you.”

Norawit squeezed his hand.

“Hey. We’ll figure something out. Our little company has never backed down before. We have leverage on him. We’ll deal with that sick bastard.”

“But right now you need to focus on yourself. You relapsed. I relapsed too. Everything that happened…”

“My fault,” North said.

“No, it—”

“My fault,” he repeated firmly. “From beginning to end.”

And the room fell quiet again.

“My fault,” the younger one insisted. “From beginning to end. And I’m not just talking about almost dying from an overdose. Everything is my fault, do you understand?”

“Northie, please…”

“No. Enough, Nor,” the boy whispered, letting out a weary sigh. “Enough. I know you feel responsible for me because you took our parents’ place. But you’re always looking for excuses for me, and sometimes there simply aren’t any. Everything started the moment I got involved with Damian. That’s on me. If I hadn’t been so stupid and weak, I wouldn’t have gotten in this deep.”

“They would have found another way to destroy us even without you,” Norawit replied quietly. “I’m guilty of a lot too.”

“You can’t know that,” North said, staring thoughtfully ahead. “Because of me, all three of us are in danger now. Me, you… and Nattawat. Pond is already dead. We couldn’t save him. I don’t want to sit around waiting to see which one of the people I love will die next.”

His voice trembled.

“I wouldn’t survive that. If there were anything I could do for you right now, I’d give everything I have left to do it. I’d protect you.”

“I know,” Norawit answered softly, running a hand through his hair. “We’ll figure it out. We always do. Somehow we’ll find a way out.”

“You,” North corrected quietly.

“What?”

“You always found a way out. I was just the kid behind you, the one whose hand you were holding. I never did anything important. I just relied on you.”

“Stop it,” Norawit said sharply. “You’re hurting me when you talk like that.”

“The truth always hurts,” North said with a faint, crooked smile. “But that’s what makes it the truth. And I finally understand it now. You of all people should know that.”

He looked up at him.

“One shocking truth destroyed your relationship with Nattawat. So where is he now? Not with you. Because neither of you was ready for it.”

His voice dropped.

“So why did we even need that truth?”

Norawit let out a slow breath.

“I don’t know anymore. But it’s better to know, isn’t it? I needed to understand who was responsible for all of this. And they needed to know who their father really was.”

“And who exactly did that make happier?” North asked hoarsely. “The truth always comes out eventually. I don’t blame you for looking for it. But… not everyone was ready for it.”

He swallowed.

“I definitely wasn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

North simply intertwined their fingers and gave a small smile, silently telling him that he wasn’t angry.

They sat like that for a few quiet minutes.

Then North let out a long breath, as if something inside him had finally loosened.

“I’m the one who should be apologizing every day,” he said. “At least for not showing you how much you meant to me all this time. I love you, Norawit.”

“I know,” Norawit said with a warm smile. “And I love you too, brat.”

“But that’s not enough, is it?” North continued quietly. “You’re unhappy because something important is missing from your life.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“Him.”

Norawit looked down.

“We’re working on that.”

North nodded slowly, studying his brother’s face. The moment Nattawat was mentioned, the sadness in Norawit’s eyes deepened, even though he hadn’t said his name out loud.

That alone said a lot.

“You asked me something recently,” North said thoughtfully. “You asked if I could accept all of this just to be with Night.”

Norawit blinked.

“Yeah… I think I remember that.”

“It’s a difficult question,” North said. “He means a lot to me. And I know I matter to him too. Hell, he saved my life. He stayed by my side the whole time.”

He hesitated.

“But… I don’t…”

Norawit noticed the faint shine of tears in his brother’s eyes before he quickly blinked them away.

“But you don’t love him,” Norawit finished softly.

“I couldn’t,” North admitted. “Maybe I’m simply not capable of loving anyone the way I love you.”

He gave a small, sad smile.

“I like him a lot. Maybe I’m even in love with him. But I keep holding myself back. Somewhere deep down I feel like those feelings would destroy me in the end. I don’t want to give my heart to anyone.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to disappoint him,” North said quietly. “I’m a difficult person. Being with me isn’t easy. Night deserves the kind of love you and his brother have.”

He looked away.

“He’s amazing. And I just drag him down. I’m a constant reminder to him that people can be cruel. I’m always angry, always fighting. I lose control. That’s a painful trigger for him.”

He shrugged slightly.

“We’re just not compatible. Even if we’re drawn to each other like magnets. Maybe we should just let each other go.”

“Did you talk to him about it?”

“Of course. You know I’m terrible at hiding my emotions.”

“But he still helps you. He still stays.”

“I’d do the same for him,” North said. “He’s important to me.”

He paused.

“But to answer your question… if I loved Night the way you love Nattawat, I’d accept everything.”

He nodded firmly.

“How could I not? You can’t get rid of feelings like that. It wouldn’t be easy, sure. But I’d do anything to keep that kind of love from being destroyed by something like this.”

He looked straight at Norawit.

“Love like that shouldn’t be broken by anything. It forgives everything. It accepts everything.”

His voice softened.

“You wanted to take the first step toward him, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Norawit admitted quietly. “More times than I can count.”

“And he probably wants that too.”

North watched him carefully.

“Do you miss him?”

“Unbearably,” Norawit whispered.

North laughed softly.

“You two are disgustingly happy when you’re together. But when you’re apart, everyone around you suffers because of it.”

Then his expression turned serious.

“I know how much you love him. And he’d do anything for you too.”

He ticked the examples off on his fingers.

“Driving a car with no brakes during a race. Cutting people off. Killing. Getting revenge. Even racing straight toward a train at full speed.”

His eyes hardened.

“He’d face death itself to protect you.”

He looked at his brother again.

“I’m sure he’s the kind of person who will never abandon you. The one who’ll always catch you when you fall.”

He squeezed Norawit’s shoulder.

“That’s why I trust him with you.”

Norawit raised an eyebrow.

“Why are you telling me all this? You’ve never talked like this before.”

North smiled faintly.

“Because I don’t understand why you’re still sitting here.”

“But—”

“Did he take the first step toward you?” North interrupted. “Did he call? Text?”

“He came,” Norawit said quietly. “He was here before I came to see you.”

North snorted.

“You idiot.”

He nudged Norawit lightly with his shoulder.

“You’re going to wait until my IV is finished and I fall asleep. Then you’re getting your ass up and going to him to get back the one thing that actually makes you happy.”

“I can’t leave you.”

North looked at him seriously.

“But can you let him go forever and keep living?”

Norawit lowered his eyes.

“No… I don’t think I can.”

“Exactly,” North said softly. “I’m not going anywhere. But he might.”

He ruffled Norawit’s hair gently.

“I’m not eleven anymore, Nor. You don’t have to watch every step I take and take responsibility for everything I do. You have your own life.”

His voice softened.

“And it’s slipping past you while you keep trying to save me.”

He placed his hand over Norawit’s chest.

“For once in your life, think about what you want. Just you. Who are you suffering without right now? Who makes everything else meaningless? Who can’t you breathe without?”

He pressed his palm lightly against his brother’s heart.

“Ask yourself those questions. Right here.”

They both knew the answer.

“Nattawat,” Norawit said quietly.

North nodded.

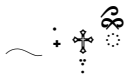
“Yeah. So don’t take that away from him. Because he belongs to you just as much.”

He pulled Norawit into a tight embrace.

“You need each other more than anyone else in this world.”

His voice was firm.

“So don’t ever let him go again.”



Titicharoenrak did exactly what his younger brother had told him to do.

He stayed by his side until dawn, waiting for the IV to finish while they talked for hours about everything and nothing. It had been a long time since they had spent time together like this—so easily, so peacefully—without constantly thinking about the countless problems hanging over their heads. They reminisced about their childhood, their trips to scout camp, old school friends, awkward dates with girls, and all the other nonsense that had once seemed so incredibly important.

They hadn’t laughed this much in years. They hadn’t felt this close in years either.

Somewhere in the endless chain of hardships life had thrown at them, they had completely forgotten that there had once been a time when everything was different. Back then they had been carefree kids, only to be abruptly thrown into the harshness of adulthood. But even during the darkest days, they had always tried to find small rays of sunlight.

When North finally fell asleep, Titicharoenrak sat there for a few more minutes, quietly watching the sunrise through the window with a soft smile.

After a long drought, rain usually comes. But today, it seemed the sky would be clear.

Gentle rays of sunlight slowly broke through the thick gray clouds on the horizon, and the sky gradually turned into a breathtaking canvas of natural color. Shades of blue and pale yellow blended together into a unique palette. It looked as though someone had spilled watercolor paint across the heavens.

From the slightly open window, a faint breeze drifted in from time to time, carrying the fresh scent of damp asphalt and morning air. Mornings always smelled astonishingly new, especially in that exact moment when the day had only just begun. After a long stretch of suffocating heat, that simple breath of cool air felt almost miraculous.

Titicharoenrak listened to the quiet, steady breathing of his brother sleeping deeply beside him and looked at him with tenderness. A pleasant warmth spread through his chest.

At that moment North looked completely peaceful. How could that not bring him comfort? Usually even his sleep was restless.

Titicharoenrak wanted to believe that this terrible incident would force him to reflect on many things, that maybe now everything would begin to change for the better.

He gently pressed a kiss to his forehead and quietly left the room.

He managed to get a few hours of rest at home before heading to work. Throughout his entire shift, while repairing cars, he couldn't stop thinking about what his younger brother had said.

To be honest, he hadn't even realized until then how important it had been for him to know what North thought about Nattawat. They had never talked about it so seriously before, but Nattawat had never been just some random guy who happened to cross his path.

He meant far more than that.

When they were together, Titicharoenrak had truly believed that their relationship could grow into something bigger one day. He had wanted that, maybe in a few years, when the time was right. Even now, when they were far apart, the thought still lingered somewhere deep inside him.

And it was exactly that realization that finally pushed him to follow his heart.

Some time had already passed since the day he had learned the truth, and the storm of emotions had begun to quiet down. In some strange way, it felt a little easier now.

What he understood clearly was that he missed Nattawat unbearably. Their last meeting had completely knocked the ground out from under his feet.

All it had taken was a few minutes sitting beside him, breathing the same air—and he had fallen in love with him all over again.

Even now he could still feel the warmth of Nattawat's fingers lingering on his skin, and the burning current that had run through his veins in that moment refused to fade.

And that scent.

The soft, vivid fragrance of blooming cherry blossoms seemed to linger everywhere around him, even though that was impossible. You could only ever catch that scent if you buried your nose in Nattawat's soft hair or pulled him into a tight embrace.

How it worked, Norawit didn't really understand.

But one thing was painfully clear.

Being without him was even worse. It was a suffocating, endless longing.

It turned out he had become so dependent on him that he would lie awake for hours at night, tossing and turning in his bed. His thoughts were completely consumed by Nattawat, and

sleep wouldn’t come until he hugged the pillow Nattawat used to sleep on tightly against his chest.

That was how he tried to fill the empty space Nattawat had left in his life.

But it couldn’t go on like that forever.

Everything around him felt wrong without him. Nothing felt right. Nothing felt complete. It was like subjecting himself to some twisted form of emotional torture.

After that meeting, and after talking with his brother, his mind understood one thing perfectly well: if he let Nattawat go now, it would be forever.

And Titicharoenrak couldn’t allow that to happen.

This was the moment when he had to swallow his pride, push past the walls he had built inside himself, and fight to bring him back.

Was that really supposed to be difficult?

Nattawat had done it for him more than once. Now it was his turn to meet him halfway.

If they didn’t sit down and talk calmly and honestly, they would only drift further and further apart with every passing day. Avoiding this conversation forever was impossible. The longer they waited, the deeper the chasm between them would grow.

He couldn’t allow it to spread like a crack in the ground. It had to be treated while it was still small—covered, cared for, allowed to heal before it became impossible to fix.

North was right.

Feelings like theirs should never be broken by anything or anyone.

And now, strangely enough, it already felt a little easier.

The story was still a painful wound for him. But at least when he thought about Nattawat now, what he felt was overwhelming longing, not the crushing weight of the past.

Maybe it was only because the initial shock had begun to fade. At first every memory and emotion had been sharpened to the point of agony.

It was only natural.

He had carried that pain inside him for ten years.

Honestly, he had expected something worse from himself. But now, when he remembered Nattawat, his mind brought back only one thing: their happy moments together. The feelings those moments had filled him with.

Every single time his thoughts weren't consumed by plans of revenge, his mind returned automatically to that world where they had once been together.

Titicharoenrak still didn't know what Nattawat himself thought about all of this. Surely he had his own perspective. But one thing was obvious, he missed him just as much.

If anything, Nattawat hid it far worse than he did.

It showed in his words, in his actions, in the way he looked at him. It was painfully clear how much he missed their relationship.

And yet he still found the strength not to hold him back. He gave him space. Time to be alone.

That mattered.

It was exactly why such a deep understanding had existed between them from the very beginning.

It was something instinctive.

Something that lived somewhere beneath the surface of words.

But there was one more problem. Night still had no idea what was going on. North had promised to talk to him personally in the near future. Norawit had entrusted him with that unpleasant task, because he was the only one who was especially close to Night right now. And, truth be told, Norawit himself was a little afraid to do it.

Everyone understood perfectly well that Night was the only one who might try to defend that bastard, because he still clung to his attachment to him. Unfortunately, that monster had a strong influence over him, and somewhere deep down the boy might even still love him. That could complicate everything, and Titicharoenrak had no desire to go to war with him.

But none of them actually knew how he would react. Maybe all those monstrous facts about his father's past would finally open his eyes, once and for all, and free him from whatever lingering feelings he still had for Nut. After all, that bastard didn't deserve even a drop of his love. He was utterly unworthy of it.

After returning home from work, Norawit spends a long time in the shower, gathering the courage to take a decisive step forward. He steps out from under the hot streams of water, carefully drying his body and hair with a soft towel. Then he gets dressed, preparing to head to a very familiar address.

For once, he had deliberately avoided drinking. He needed to pull himself together and put an end to this sudden and unplanned breakdown. Besides, he didn't want Jirochtikul to feel disgusted by the smell of alcohol when they talked.

He studies his reflection in the mirror critically and runs a hand through his still slightly damp hair, pushing it back. His brown eyes sparkle with anticipation for the important meeting ahead.

He knows he doesn't look perfect. The binge had left dark circles under his eyes and a deeply exhausted look. But after a few days of sobriety, even that would fade.

He grabs his jacket from the hanger on the wall and quickly presses a kiss to Jumu's wet nose as the cat sits on the dresser.

"I'll be back soon. Behave yourself. Daddy will bring you something tasty," he says softly, stroking the fluffy cheeks of the cat.

Jumu purrs approvingly in response and closes his eyes in satisfaction, instantly drawing a hopelessly fond smile from his owner. Norawit is utterly weak when it comes to him.

He lingers there for a few more seconds, nuzzling the cat affectionately, before grabbing his keys from the shelf and opening the apartment door.

And then he freezes.

His mouth parts slightly in shock when he sees the unexpected guest standing right in front of him.

Nattawat had clearly been about to press the doorbell, because he slowly lowers his hand and hides it inside the long sleeve of his white sweatshirt.

Norawit swallows nervously and blinks quickly, unable to believe that the person standing before him is really there.

His eyes roam uncontrollably from the top of Nattawat's head down to his feet, catching on every inch of that familiar figure. He almost wants to pinch himself just to make sure it isn't a dream.

It feels like an eternity has passed since the last time they saw each other, even though it's only been a day.

Everything about him is so painfully perfect.

Those slightly startled wide eyes that seem to hold an entire universe inside them. Those soft lips he keeps biting while shifting nervously from foot to foot. The black cap covering almost his entire face.

Natt opens his mouth slightly, takes a deep breath, and offers him a shy smile. His shoulders lift a little in an apologetic gesture, as if to say he's not entirely sure how he ended up here either.

He's clearly nervous. A little embarrassed.

God. He looks like a schoolboy trying to ask his first love out on a date.

His expression makes it obvious that he's afraid of how Norawit will react.

He had come to talk to him. He simply couldn't bear all of this any longer.

Even though he had promised himself he wouldn't pressure Norawit and would give him space, he still couldn't keep that promise. Less than a day after their last meeting, he had already rushed back.

He had missed him too much.

And now he was here, finally seeing him face to face again after what felt like unbearable time apart. Everything inside him was spinning wildly with joy.

His heart felt as if it were waking up from a long sleep, pounding in his head like a jackhammer.

And yet it felt so good.

"Hi?" Nattawat says quietly, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

It sounds so hesitant that Norawit nods, barely holding back a smile.

"Hi."

"You don't mind that I came, do you?"

"If you came here to sing me a serenade, the window is on the other side, Natt," Titicharoenrak replies, arching an eyebrow arrogantly.

Nattawat laughs softly, his nose scrunching up in a devastatingly cute way.

That simple trick alone nearly makes Norawit's knees buckle.

It has been his fatal weakness since the very first day they met. But right now it hits like an atomic bomb.

He's so defenseless against it.

"Can I sing here?" Nattawat asks, narrowing his eyes playfully.

"You don't have a guitar," Norawit snorts, shrugging lightly.

"A cappella?"

"Then get down on one knee."

"Anything else?"

"You're missing flowers. You know how it goes in movies—when this happens, the guy gives flowers and the main characters kiss until the credits roll."

"I could run and get them," Nattawat replies seriously, glancing at his watch. "I'll do anything for you. The shop should still be open."

“Not even a minute has passed and you’re already flirting with me,” Norawit says, biting his lip to suppress a pleased smile.

“You’re the one who asked me to.”

“Are you serious?” Norawit asks, confused. “I was joking. I don’t need a serenade. I already know you’re a hopeless romantic.”

“So I shouldn’t sing?” Nattawat asks suspiciously.

“You shouldn’t,” Norawit laughs.

But Nattawat leans against the doorframe and begins to sing softly anyway.

“I’ll fight, babe, I’ll fight
To win back your love again
I will be there, I will be there.”

“Is that something new?” Norawit teases. “Did you write it for me?”

“That’s Scorpions, idiot. Timeless classic,” Nattawat smiles, gazing at him with obvious affection.

“Mmm,” Norawit hums, tilting his head.

“You should give me a chance
This can’t be the end
I’m still loving you,” he murmurs back, pressing his temple against the door.

“Not bad,” Nattawat says with a smug grin. “But a little dirty. Want me to train you sometime? I’m pretty good at it.”

“I’ve had enough of your training.”

“Alright. Were you heading somewhere? Did I interrupt?” Nattawat asks, glancing over his outfit.

“Not anymore,” Norawit says mysteriously. “Come in.”

The moment Nattawat steps inside, he feels as though he’s returned home.

And the trembling of his heart tells him it has nothing to do with the apartment itself, but with the person who lives there.

It’s incredible. He doesn’t even feel this comfortable in his own place.

A familiar scent instantly surrounds him as he removes his shoes and follows Norawit into the room.

It doesn’t smell like Norawit’s delicious cooking like it usually does. Instead there are strong notes of something sweet, mixed with cigarette smoke and the freshness of the ocean.

It smells exactly like Norawit.

The window is slightly open, letting in the evening sea breeze, making the light curtain sway softly near the floor.

Nattawat had expected to see the chaotic mess Norawit used to live in before they practically moved in together. But the place is fairly clean. Only a few scattered things lie around.

Though… the television is broken.

Which means either someone has been taking care of him, or Norawit finally learned to keep things tidy during his absence.

Jumu suddenly runs in at the sound of Nattawat’s voice and immediately starts rubbing against him affectionately, surprising them both.

Nattawat picks him up and strokes his fur, looking at Norawit in amazement.

“Looks like he missed me,” he says proudly.

“Not just him,” Norawit replies quietly.

“I finally won you over, buddy. Just one dinner and you surrendered that easily?”

The cat rubs his head against Nattawat’s hand and purrs happily. Normally he’s only this affectionate with Norawit, but it seems he’s accepted Nattawat too.

After a moment, Jumu gets bored and jumps down, strutting proudly across the room before disappearing into the hallway, almost as if deliberately leaving them alone.

“Some things never change,” Norawit laughs.

Nattawat stares at him, completely mesmerized.

His gaze lingers too long, too intensely, and he realizes Norawit might feel uncomfortable. So he quickly looks away, studying the tiny flower-patterned wallpaper he’s seen hundreds of times, trying to regain control of himself.

“I was actually going to see you,” Norawit says suddenly.

“Really?” Nattawat asks, surprised.

“Yes. I think we finally need to talk about all of this. I can’t take it anymore.”

“You’re right,” Nattawat replies, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Do you still have any questions about it?”

“No. I’ve read the whole file several times. I understand how everything is connected and… well, I think I understand everything.”

“It’s complicated. I know it must be hard for you to distance yourself from it when I’m right here.”

“Honestly? Not anymore. You’re not to blame,” Norawit explains with a heavy sigh, remembering the moment he first realized the truth. “It was hard at the beginning, when everything finally clicked. My emotions were all over the place. I was angry at the whole world—at myself, at you too. But in reality, you’re just as much a victim of the circumstances as I am. The only difference between us is that you weren’t searching for your mother’s killer. If anything, the truth must be even worse for you. Now you know he did it. Your own father killed your mother. That’s… monstrous.”

“I had my suspicions before, but honestly, I never would have believed it,” Nattawat says with a short sigh, shaking his head. “Of course I knew my father was a cruel man, but this… I could never have imagined something like that.”

“How are you handling all of this?” Norawit asks carefully, frowning as he studies him. “How have you been?”

“Terrible. Want to know how I feel about my father being completely insane?” Nattawat lets out a bitter little laugh and shrugs. “At first it shocked me. But now… I realize I’m not that surprised. I always knew he was a bastard. I just didn’t realize he was this much of one. It hurt. I learned so many things about myself and my family. I still have trouble believing Lim is my brother, but it’s the truth. And that night I left because I needed time to process it all. It hit me hard. And the fact that he killed your parents…”

Nattawat falls silent for a few seconds, slowly shaking his head as if he still can’t quite believe it.

“I never expected things to turn out like this. It’s cruel.”

“Yes,” Norawit nods with a resigned sigh. “It is.”

“What’s even more disgusting is that he knew. That night during the qualifying stage he was laughing at me, knowing I’d never find what I was looking for. But apparently his loyal dog isn’t quite so loyal. Nut thinks he can twist Damian around his finger. And partly he can—he manipulates him a lot. But Damian manipulates him just as much.”

“So I guess I should be grateful to him,” Norawit says with a faint, ironic smile. “He’s protecting you. At least in that sense we’re on the same side. Still… Lim is a strange and suspicious man. A dark horse who plays by his own rules. We don’t know what he really wants. He creates this beautiful illusion of friendship, and then suddenly throws you back into reality and reminds you of your place. That’s how it started with North. I can’t trust him.”

“We’ll rely on ourselves when it comes to destroying Nuthwang,” Nattawat says uncertainly. “But obviously we’ll need help. If he does want to help, maybe we shouldn’t refuse.”

“Destroying him?” Norawit asks in surprise.

“You don’t think I’m going to defend him, do you?” Nattawat raises an eyebrow.

“But he’s your—”

“Who?” Nattawat cuts him off, shaking his head with disappointment. “My father? No, Norawit. He’s nothing to me. Not once in my life has he actually been a father to me. That’s just genetics. Being someone’s parent is something you have to earn. I have plenty of reasons to hate him. I’m not going to stand there and protect him.”

“You do understand that I’m not planning to just send him to prison,” Norawit clarifies quietly. “I want revenge. Blood for blood.”

“He killed my mother,” Nattawat says firmly. “The only person I loved when I was a kid. He killed my aunt, someone who could have given Damian a normal life, maybe stopped him from becoming such an asshole. He tormented Night for years and left him with a mountain of childhood trauma. And he killed Pond. Our friend, who had nothing to do with any of this. Not with my family, not with yours, not with Powerslide, not with any of his problems. He killed him just because he could. Who the hell does he think he is, deciding who lives and who dies? That’s something I will never forgive.”

“And you’re really ready to just watch while I kill him?”

“I’ll close my eyes while it happens,” Nattawat answers calmly. “And you’ll do what you have to do. I won’t tie your hands. If it brings you peace, if it finally helps you heal… then I’ll go through it with you. Want to know why? Because if I ever have to choose between him and you, I’ll always choose you.”

Norawit frowns slightly.

“I thought you’d say revenge solves nothing. That I shouldn’t become that kind of person. All that stuff.”

“When we first started dating,” Nattawat says, “I already knew what you wanted. You told me honestly that you intended to kill the man who destroyed your family. I accepted you with all of that. I promised I’d help if I could. So I don’t have the right to judge you now. Why should your decision change just because he happens to be my biological father?”

He shrugs thoughtfully.

“Let’s be honest. That bastard sent me to my death once already. Now he wants me to risk my life earning money for him. Is that what fatherly love looks like? He doesn’t care about me at all. I’m just a resource to him. Same as Lim. So why should I care about him? Why should I defend him?”

Nattawat pauses.

“My father is Curtis Keeland. He didn’t give me life, but he showed me what it means to be someone’s son. He cared about me. Protected me. Even now he still does, even though we’ve

long gone our separate ways. You know the name of the man responsible. So it's up to you to decide what happens next. This is your story. I'm not going to rewrite it."

"Alright…" Norawit exhales quietly and nods slowly, staring ahead. "That's clear, at least. One less problem for me. I thought you'd try to protect him. Now we just need to figure out where Night stands."

"He'll be torn," Nattawat says. "But if his common sense is stronger than his emotions, he'll understand what kind of man raised him. It'll be just as shocking for him. Deep down he's attached to him, of course. But not enough to defend him blindly. Nut caused him a lot of pain. He has plenty of reasons to hate him."

"Even so," Norawit says firmly, looking back at him, "he won't stop me."

"Do you already know what you're going to do?" Nattawat asks. "How you'll kill him?"

"No. I need a good plan. We're both still in the race, that's already risky enough. And there's that device inside us that limits what we can do. First we need to deal with that. Which means we'll probably need Damian. Looks like we'll have to make a temporary truce with him."

He bites the inside of his cheek thoughtfully.

"Hwang is dangerous. Any move from my side could look like a threat. I have to be extremely careful."

"And play by his rules for now," Nattawat nods.

"Exactly. At least until I come up with something solid. It's not enough to kill him, I have to survive too. If I mess up, they'll kill me before I even realize it. They might kill both of us. You heard what Lim said. He can't save you. So we can't rely on any family ties. Hwang will destroy you too if you're standing next to me."

"Let him try," Nattawat replies with a hint of challenge, scratching his eyebrow. "Hell with it. I'm not going to sit back while he keeps ruining the lives of people I care about. You'll be avenging your parents. I'll be avenging Pond. This race has to end once and for all. If only because that's what Pond wanted. He dreamed of your victory. And in this case… killing Nut would be that victory."

Norawit breathes deeply, staring at him.

He hadn't expected Nattawat to support him like this. Even though Nattawat hated the man, Norawit had assumed he wouldn't be able to take revenge on Hwang. Simply because Nattawat had never killed anyone, had never even come close, and this was his biological father.

But apparently he'd been wrong.

And Norawit didn't even know whether to admire him or be horrified by him.

Right now, though, he was simply grateful. Because he knew he wouldn't survive all of this alone.

"There's one more important question left," Nattawat says quietly, almost afraid to break the fragile calm between them.

"Yes," Norawit answers softly, clearing his throat.

"Let me say something first. It'll be easier that way. And I think… you'll want to hear something from me before you answer this question, even to yourself."

"Alright. Yes. Of course."

"Norawit…" Nattawat whispers, then falls silent.

He lets out a nervous laugh and takes a deep breath.

"Damn, I had this whole speech prepared back at home. Seriously. And now I've forgotten everything. I didn't even know if you'd let me in, so I tried to prepare for anything. I don't even know where to start. These kinds of honest conversations are hard for me… though with you it was always different. You always made it so easy for me. But right now I'm so scared, God. Everything inside me is shaking. Look at my hands."

He gives a weak laugh and holds them out. The sleeves of his sweatshirt almost completely hide them, leaving only his fingers visible, and they're trembling noticeably.

He really is that nervous.

"What are you so afraid of?" Norawit asks, sitting down beside him in hopes of calming him a little.

"You," Nattawat blurts out quickly. "Well—no, not exactly you. I'm afraid you won't be able to let all of this go. Your emotions… your feelings. I'm afraid I'll lose you forever. But whatever you decide right now, before you even answer me, just know it'll be the right decision. I'll accept it."

"That sounds like you're already saying goodbye."

"Honestly, I prepared myself for the worst. I keep trying to put myself in your place, imagine what you're feeling… but I can't. You can't truly understand emotions like that unless you're living through them. So I know there's a possibility that we'll have to accept everything and go our separate ways. I'm more afraid of that than anything. But if that's your choice… I'll understand."

Nattawat pauses, gathering his thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I know you'll say I shouldn't apologize. But I need to. Yes, I didn't kill them, and I didn't know anything about it—but I still need this, you understand? I want your forgiveness. Because I feel guilty for what my family did—to you, and to North. Maybe I'm taking it too personally, but I can't help it. So I'll keep apologizing again and again. I'm

sorry, Norawit. I'm ready to say it hundreds of times a day until I hear an answer from you that finally lets me breathe."

"I think I should apologize too," Norawit says quietly. "I broke my promise and left you alone. I know that must have hurt you. I'm sorry for that. But none of this is your fault, Natt. There's nothing for me to forgive you for."

"That doesn't make it easier," Nattawat whispers miserably.

They sit in silence for several minutes. The only sounds in the room are the distant rush of the ocean outside and the steady ticking of the clock on the wall. Each of them is lost in his own thoughts.

Titicharoenrak furrows his brow, unable to fully understand why Nattawat feels so guilty for something he didn't personally do. And yet, somewhere deep inside, he probably knows the answer. Nattawat simply has an enormous, compassionate heart—one he keeps guarded from everyone except a single person. He feels guilty because he couldn't protect him from that pain… and because the people responsible are bound to him by blood. It's the kind of guilt he imposes on himself, but that's just who he is. He worries about things he shouldn't have to carry.

Still, when Titicharoenrak tries to imagine himself in Nattawat's place, he understands. He would probably go just as crazy with the same feeling. If their roles were reversed, he'd be apologizing endlessly too.

Carefully, Norawit reaches for Nattawat's hand resting on his knee and gently strokes the warm skin with his thumb. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Nattawat flinch slightly at the unexpected touch before letting out a quiet sigh. Clearly, he hadn't expected that.

Norawit softly traces his fingers, almost as if studying them for the first time. They've touched him so many times he's long since lost count. The skin is soft, though rough along the pinkened pads of his fingers, calloused from playing the guitar. Those hands have always been the gentlest with him.

"I forgive you, Nattawat," Norawit says quietly, looking down at their joined hands. "I forgive you, do you hear me? Not for a single day, not even a minute, have I blamed you. But if that's what you needed to hear… then yes. I forgive you."

"Thank you. I really needed that," Nattawat replies, letting out a heavy breath.

"Do you feel better?"

He nods shortly, staring straight ahead. It really did help. He isn't quite sure how it works, but those words bring a strange kind of relief. Knowing that Norawit never blamed him matters more than he realized. He hadn't even known how badly he needed to hear it until this moment.

Strange, maybe.

“I’m hopeless,” he murmurs with a crooked smile. “I can’t exist without you. When you’re not around, I feel like only half a person. What am I supposed to do with that, sexy?”

“Oh my God,” Norawit laughs. “I haven’t heard that in ages.”

“You remember?”

“I remember everything. Absolutely everything.”

“Me too,” Nattawat says, and something in his gaze grows noticeably sadder. “Every moment with you is impossible to forget. I don’t know how you do it, but somehow every single one of them feels happy in its own way.”

“That’s because we’re happy when we’re together.”

“Were.”

“Yes… we were,” Norawit agrees with a quiet sigh.

“To be honest, I have no idea what I’ll do if this ends forever. I keep saying I’ll accept it, but I don’t understand how I’m supposed to live in a world where you’re not beside me. Even during all this time when I gave you space to be alone, I never really felt your absence completely, but it was still unbearable. So what happens after that?” Nattawat asks quietly, more to himself than to Norawit, blinking slowly as he thinks. “What will happen to me the moment I let go of your hand for the last time? When I close the door behind me and never get the chance to open it again?”

He pauses, swallowing.

“It might sound dramatic. Maybe even cliché. But it’s the truth. When that moment comes… I know I’ll disappear. I gave you something I never trusted anyone else with. And if you leave, you’ll take it with you. Can a person live without a heart? Without a soul? Of course not. And neither can I. Because all of that belongs to you.”

He stands and slowly walks toward the window, weighing every word he’s said. Outside, the buildings glow with scattered lights, but the view no longer fills him with the same quiet wonder it once did. His life has lost its color.

The reason for his genuine smile, the only reason, sits behind him in this room, deciding what will happen to them.

It’s painfully simple: if he wants to be happy, he needs Norawit.

But the decision has to come from him.

“This wasn’t just a blow for you,” Nattawat continues quietly, nervously biting the edge of his thumbnail. “This whole thing shook me too. I kept asking myself—can I live with this truth and still be with you? Can I look you in the eyes without flinching? Can I feel comfortable in a relationship with you after everything?”

“And what was your answer?” Norawit asks.

“Yes. I want to try,” Nattawat replies firmly.

“Why? I mean… I know why, but still. How do you find the strength to move past something like this?”

“The reason is actually simple. I don’t want to remember what my life was like before you. And I don’t want to know what it could be like after you—without you.”

“Do you think we can get through this?”

“It won’t be easy. Things between us will never be the same again. But I think we could try. We only have two choices: stand together against the pain… or surrender to it and let it tear us apart.”

“You’re right. Things will never be the same.”

“All this time I’ve felt so miserable. I tried to find something—anything—good in my life, but I couldn’t. Because the only good thing I have is you. Nothing else can make me happy. I want to fight for us. Do you?”

“Nattawat…”

“I know how much you love me,” Nattawat says, turning around. The look in his eyes is so painfully raw it makes Norawit’s heart ache. “It’s not fair to let that love fall apart. We should fight for it. But if you don’t want to… I won’t hold you back. I don’t want to be selfish with you.”

“I just…”

“What do you feel when you look at me right now? What’s going through your mind?”

“Just let me speak. Don’t interrupt.”

“…Yeah. Sorry. I’m just…really nervous.”

“I’m thinking about how much I missed you,” Norawit says as he stands and takes a step toward him. “How much I missed your scent, your laugh, your voice.” Another small step. “How much I needed to touch you. How badly I wanted to kiss you and have you.”

He stops at arm’s length, his eyes never leaving Nattawat’s.

“I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t eat without you. I had to get drunk just to escape a world where you weren’t there. All I could think about was how much I needed you.”

“And there are no bad memories right now? Nothing hurting inside you?” Nattawat asks carefully, swallowing the tightness in his throat as he studies Norawit’s face.

“Not now. It was like that the first few days. But the longer I was without you, the worse I felt. The only thing that hurts is losing you. At first I even tried to find something—anything—in you that would prove you’re not as perfect as I think you are.” He lets out a small laugh, shrugging. “I didn’t find anything.”

“I love you so much. Everything about you. Your big eyes. Your sweet lips. The way you wrinkle your nose. Your voice, I could listen to it for hours. Every mole whose place I know by heart. Your hair that always smells so good.”

His voice softens.

“But I also love what’s inside you. The part of you you never showed anyone but me. Your beautiful, endless inner world. Your fragile heart. Your pure soul. I even love your damn snoring—because it’s mine. It’s familiar. It belongs to me. All of it does, and I love it so much. God…”

“Say it,” Nattawat whispers, breathing unevenly. “I want you to say it out loud.”

“I’m not ready to let you go, Nattawat. And I want to fight for us,” Norawit says.

“That’s your yes?”

“Yes,” he answers, giving a small nod.

They both step forward at the same time.

Norawit grabs the back of Nattawat’s neck and pulls him close in a sudden motion. Nattawat catches him by the shoulders, and their lips collide in a long-awaited, impossibly sweet kiss.

In that moment, it feels as if the world finally returns to its natural rhythm. Color seeps back into the dull gray around them, and the sounds of life grow louder again.

You could almost hear Norawit’s heart slowly stitching itself back together, piece by piece, while Nattawat’s soul, at last, begins to rest.

Chapter End Notes

I dedicate this chapter to myself — to Dana from a year ago, who stood strong against everything and didn’t lose herself (it’s not about drugs)

Chapter 16: XVI

Chapter Notes

I want to inform you right away that there will be an epilogue.

Enjoy ~

“So what’s the plan?” Pahn asks, folding her arms across her chest as she paces back and forth along the asphalt.

The heavy soles of her boots strike the ground in a steady rhythm, matching the length of her steps like the slow swing of a calming pendulum in a psychologist’s office. The sound echoes across the empty track at the Loop, where the group has gathered to discuss what they’ll do next.

The guys are scattered near the metal fence, sitting on stacks of old tires and watching the graceful way she moves while trying to piece together a plan for the revenge that lies ahead.

Satang sits beside Phuwin, sharing a single cigarette between them. Norawit has his arms wrapped around Nattawat, while a few meters away North lounges lazily on the ground. Off to the side, apart from everyone else, Night stands near his car.

“Can you do something about that damn Powerslide system?” Satang asks, squinting slightly. “You’re the brain of this operation, sweetheart. If you can’t handle it, we’re all useless.”

“I tried,” Pahn replies. “Just like Damian said, hacking it and rewriting the system is basically impossible. At least for me. You’d need an entire chain of codes that I simply can’t crack, and even after that there’s an identification process. It’s locked down so tightly that even our very own Tony Stark apparently can’t remake his own creation. The only thing he can do is destroy it. He knows the exact sequence needed.”

“Say it in simpler terms,” Norawit mutters. “We’re screwed.”

The others sigh quietly, because he’s right.

“Well…” Pahn wrinkles her nose slightly. “If we’re being honest, yes. But I’m not going to sit around doing nothing while one of you two gets killed.”

“Most likely me,” Norawit says with a crooked smile. “They need Nattawat for the grand finale. We all know I’m only in this race so they can kill me.”

“Yeah, but you made it to the final too,” Nattawat says, resting his head on Norawit’s shoulder. “We already ruined their plans once. Nobody knows what they’re really thinking, but as long as you’re still listed as a participant, you’re still in the game. We’ll keep fighting.”

“And at the same time we still can’t turn off that stupid system,” Phuwin sighs irritably. “Fantastic.”

“In theory it can be disabled and then destroyed,” Pahn explains, “but in reality it’s an incredibly complex mechanism. That’s what makes it unique. It’s practically indestructible. You can’t just switch it off forever. Even after the race ends, it will remain active in sleep mode. And we need to get rid of it completely if we want to make sure we never deal with it again. Right?”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Satang asks, looking around at everyone with concern. “We don’t have much time. In a week, maybe less, the signal for the next stage will come. But we can’t let one of the guys die.”

“No,” Pahn says firmly, staring down at the asphalt in thought. “No one else is dying.”

She pauses, thinking.

“We just need to come up with a plan. If we can’t beat the system from the technical side, then we’ll have to approach it differently.”

“And how exactly do we do that, sweetheart?” Phuwin asks with a lazy shrug.

“If we can’t destroy the system,” she says slowly, “then at the very least we need to disable it. After that we’ll figure out the next step. But first we need to eliminate the person controlling it.”

Her gaze shifts toward the older Jirochtikul.

“Sorry, dragon, but—”

“No,” Night suddenly interrupts, shaking his head. “Wait.”

“Come on, man,” Satang says. “He deserves it, don’t you think? And by the way, the lives of Norawit and Nattawat depend on this right now.”

“I know,” Night says quietly. “But that’s still not the best way. It’s too risky. I just… we need to think this through. Every possible option.”

“That inhuman monster has killed countless people without blinking,” Phuwin says with a cold laugh. “And you’re telling us it’s not the best option?”

“We’re still talking about my father,” Night replies quietly.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Phuwin says dryly. “Let me remind you who your father actually is, a corrupt piece of trash sitting in a judge’s chair. A criminal, a sadist, a rapist, and a damn murderer. The most rotten creature on this planet. Do you fully understand what he’s done?”

He spreads his hands.

“Think about it again, friend. I’m sorry, but you know I’m right.”

Night lowers his head and says nothing.

There’s nothing he can say in defense, because Tangsakyuen has spoken the brutal truth that all of them now know.

Even Night doesn’t understand why, deep down, he still clings to the urge to protect his father. The man doesn’t deserve it. Everything he has learned about him has shaken the ground beneath his feet, but maybe he still hasn’t fully processed the horror of it all.

Or maybe some part of him still hopes that Nut cares about him—at least a little.

“That’s enough,” North suddenly snaps at Phuwin. “This isn’t his fault. Don’t forget that children aren’t responsible for their parents. Your old man wasn’t exactly a saint either. When he abandoned your mother, you still tried to reconnect with him years later, even though he treated you like nothing. So let’s not start this again. We’ve already been through every stage, from rage to acceptance. He’s trying to make sense of it in his head, and that’s normal. Unlike his father, he actually has a heart.”

“There are no excuses for him,” Pahn says firmly, shaking her head.

“I agree with you, beautiful,” North replies. “But kids shouldn’t be punished for their parents’ crimes. So leave Night alone. Of course this is how he reacts, we’re talking about killing his father.”

“And you don’t want that?” Phuwin asks.

“More than anything in the world I want revenge,” North answers coldly. “I meant every word I said before. Nuthwang deserves to die like a stray dog with no name and no grave. But right now the most important thing is the lives of those two.”

He nods toward his older brother and his boyfriend.

“We think about them first.”

Silence falls over the group as everyone realizes he’s right.

Right now their main goal is keeping them alive.

As much as that’s even possible in a situation like this.

Nattawat may not be risking himself quite as recklessly, but Norawit is skating across thin ice at full speed, back and forth. The fact that he keeps escaping death by sheer miracle must already be driving Hwang insane, and that definitely won’t end well.

If anything, it’s only making him angrier.

Norawit has already managed to ruin the villain's plans to kill him twice. Barely, but he crossed the finish line each time thanks to Nattawat and their friends.

There's no way that will go unpunished.

Honestly, it's almost surprising that no one has simply put a bullet through his head yet.

The only reason is that the stakes on him have doubled after the previous stage. They can't just kill him like that. For Hwang, it's important that it happens during the race—so everything looks clean to his clients and they keep their faith in the spectacle.

It has to look like an accident.

Like nothing more than another contestant failing one of the brutal tests the organizers love to stage.

Right now, no one knew what to do next. How were they supposed to protect not only themselves but, in a sense, the entire world from that creature who had completely lost his mind? If there was another "Powerslide" next year, more young racers would die—kids who only wanted victory and glory. It had to be stopped at any cost.

What made everything even more complicated was the fact that they would have to go up against a powerful man they all knew far too well.

The latest revelations about the tangled history of the Titicharoenrak and Jirochtikul families had been difficult for everyone to process. But despite everything, they were simply glad that Norawit and Nattawat were sitting there together now. After everything they had been through, that alone felt like a victory. For their friends, it was a reason to celebrate. They had worried about their relationship more than anything else.

Norawit had finally pulled himself together again and was trying hard not to drink. He knew perfectly well that if he fell back into that habit, it would lead him down a road he never wanted to walk again. That remarkable boy had helped him become better. Because of him, Norawit looked more alive now. He smiled again.

And Nattawat could hardly take his eyes off him.

He seemed to savor every second of being close to him again, staying near him at all times, as if afraid to let him out of sight. Somehow they had managed to survive the storm, saving not only their love, but themselves. All they had needed was a little time to process everything.

Neither of them regretted the pause they had taken. That break had been necessary for both of them. And in the end, it was the strength of their feelings that brought them back together.

Still, the weight of the terrible truth had affected their friends as well.

And despite that, the desire for revenge had not faded.

Pond's death had shaken all of them deeply. They had lost someone important, someone they loved, and they all dreamed of seeing his killer receive the punishment he deserved. At this point, nothing could stop them—not even the fact that the war they were preparing to fight was against the father of the Jirochtikul brothers, people they cared about deeply.

Almost everyone agreed that the bastard didn't deserve to live under any circumstances. Their small group was already preparing an effective plan to eliminate him.

The only one who still had serious doubts about whether it was truly necessary was Night. But that had been expected.

North had told him everything and given him the entire file to read so he could see the evidence with his own eyes. For Night, the truth had been just as painful as it was for Norawit and Nattawat. At one point he had literally slapped himself across the face just to snap back to reality.

Even though he had known the truth for several days now, he was still in deep shock.

It simply didn't feel real.

He could barely comprehend that all of this horror had been committed by his own father. And for some reason, part of him still tried to find some sort of justification for that inhuman cruelty.

It was foolish.

Everyone around him was right. Nut didn't deserve to live, let alone to be called someone's father.

Did fathers do things like this?

It was unnatural. Monstrous.

And yet, why did he still feel the urge to protect him… when the man clearly didn't care about his children at all?

"I know all of you are ready to kill him with your bare hands, but…" the younger Jirochtikul sighs deeply, shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe exposing him would be enough? I have connections among journalists, and you have evidence, right? We can destroy his reputation. Once everything becomes public, there will be investigations and trials. He'll get what he deserves. He'll spend the rest of his life behind bars. Public outrage won't let them sweep it under the rug. They'll tear him apart themselves."

"If you want to stop Powerslide, then you have to destroy Hwang. Otherwise there's no point."

The low voice comes from somewhere behind them.

All of them turn at once.

Up in the dark rows of spectator seats at the very top of the arena, they spot Damian sitting quietly, watching them.

He looks almost like a father observing a group of reckless children constantly getting themselves into trouble. His legs are casually propped up on the seat in front of him, and he appears just as comfortable here as he does in his office at the Limhouse tower.

They exchange startled glances. None of them had expected him to be listening to their entire conversation.

The man slowly stands, adjusts his jacket, and walks down toward them with an unhurried, relaxed stride, his hands tucked into the pockets of his tailored trousers.

“And what exactly is he doing here?” Phuwin asks coldly, staring at him with open hostility.

“Were you not listening to your friends, idiot?” Lim raises an eyebrow, stopping a few steps away from Pahn.

“He might be useful to us,” Nattawat says calmly, looking at his friend. “Actually, it’s good he’s here. Though you could’ve warned us we weren’t alone.”

“So what, we’re allies with him now?” Phuwin scoffs.

“No. But sometimes you have to unite in order to win a war. We have a common enemy.”

“Fine, alpha,” Tangsakyuen sighs, spreading his hands. “And how exactly is he supposed to help if he can’t even control his own system?”

“I can give you the opportunity to kill Hwang,” Damian says, tilting his head slightly. “Does that work for you?”

“Maybe,” Phuwin replies suspiciously. “But that doesn’t mean I trust you, Moriarty.”

“Do you always give people nicknames?” Damian asks dryly.

“I can come up with a hundred more that you definitely won’t like. Your name annoys me, and so do you. Most of our problems started because of you. So forgive me if I think you’re lying about wanting to help.”

“Your opinion of me doesn’t concern me,” Damian replies calmly. “I show up where I’m not welcome if the meeting serves my interests.”

“And what exactly is your interest this time?” Pahn asks, lifting her chin defiantly.

Damian studies her smaller figure, she’s nearly a head and a half shorter than him, and responds with a confident smirk.

Even though she’s the only girl among them, her role in the group is undeniable. She’s loved, respected, and considered the smartest of them all. Anyone with half a brain could see that

these six boys would tear apart anyone who dared to hurt her—or any of them, for that matter.

Their loyalty to each other is absolute.

“You want to protect the people you care about, right?” Damian says slowly, glancing at each of them in turn. “Well, I want to protect someone too. At least try to.”

“So what’s your plan, Avengers?” he asks.

“To kill him,” Norawit answers without hesitation.

“That’s not a plan,” Damian replies. “That’s a goal. What are your actions? Your strategy? What resources do you have? And are all of you truly ready for this?”

“Yes,” they answer almost in unison.

Everyone except Night.

“And what about you?” Lim raises an eyebrow.

Night leans against the hood of his car and crosses his arms over his chest, his posture closed and defensive. Inside him, a storm is raging. The battle between being a son and simply being a decent human being is tearing him apart.

“So the decision isn’t unanimous,” Damian says with a faint smirk, brushing his hair back. “You gathered here like some sort of council to decide the fate of another man… and still haven’t reached a single conclusion.”

“Let’s be honest,” Night snaps irritably. “You all want him dead. For me, prison would be enough. Do you really want to become just like him? Murderers? I don’t understand you. What’s the point of his death? Nattawat, why are you silent? He’s our father.”

Nattawat sighs quietly and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, brother,” he says softly. “But he’s not my father. Not really. And I agree with them.”

Night stares at him in disbelief.

“God… you’re not even going to try to stop them?” he asks, his voice rising. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Nattawat only shrugs in silence. In his brother’s eyes he notices a faint flicker of pain, the kind that comes from realizing you’re standing alone. Night is clearly struggling with himself. No matter what a monster their father is, somewhere deep inside he still loves him.

And everyone here is afraid that, at the last moment, that love might make him turn against them. Or worse, stand in their way.

But Nut is not a man who deserves such feelings. He has never needed them, never understood them. To him, Night has always been nothing more than a punching bag, never a son. He barely cares about him, just as he barely cares about any of his children.

It's just… hard to truly accept something like that when you're suddenly learning so many terrible things about your own family.

"Nattawat," Night whispers, almost pleading, not taking his eyes off him. "You're not capable of something like that."

"I'm not," Nattawat replies calmly, "when it's about a good person. But our father is a real monster. Let me remind you, he killed our mother. Yes, you barely grew up with her and hardly remember her. But that woman fought to the death for the chance to take you away and raise you herself. Your life could have been completely different if it weren't for him. Do you understand that?"

He exhales heavily, running a hand through his hair.

"You could have lived with me. With her. Maybe she wouldn't have drunk herself into ruin. Maybe everything would have turned out differently. But his stubborn pride destroyed your life. She wasn't a perfect mother… but at least she never beat me. Think about everything Nut took from you."

"No one knows what would have been better," Night says quietly. "This is the life we got. That's all I can judge from."

"Exactly," Nattawat replies, staring thoughtfully ahead. "And what did you get? Childhood trauma. Scars. Fear. You don't even know what love looks like. He threw you out of the house the moment you turned eighteen. Around Nut you still feel like a child, but you're not. You're a grown man. A strong one. You shouldn't be afraid of him anymore. Remember when I stood up to him to protect you?"

"Yes," Night nods.

"I was the one who pushed you to resist him in the first place. And when you finally showed your strength, you felt free. Didn't you? Well, now you have to do the same thing again. Don't be afraid of him. I'm not, and that's my advantage."

Nattawat's voice softens.

"I know what you're feeling. I know it will hurt. But he doesn't deserve you. You need to free yourself from him for good. Those feelings are an anchor tying you to painful memories. No one's asking you to help kill him. Just don't stop us. It won't change anything."

"Yes," Norawit adds with a shrug. "After all, he killed my parents and North's for telling the truth. I won't rest while he's alive. I'll put a bullet in his head myself."

"And he killed my mother too," Damian says thoughtfully. "In a way, my existence is the reason for all this. He wanted to hide the truth about me and my connection to him. I've got

my own score to settle after all these years. I'm in."

"And Pond isn't here anymore because of him," Phuwin says after a few seconds.

Everyone tenses immediately. That wound still hurts them all.

"That's why I'm in too. Doesn't his death deserve justice?"

"And on top of everything," Satang adds, shaking his head, "that bastard sent your own brother to certain death without blinking. And you still want to protect him? I'm a kind person… but he hurt my family. So I'm in as well."

"And Max," Nattawat murmurs quietly, his brows tightening with pain. "Our father is responsible for his death too. He died in that race. He knew how important that kid was to us, but he did nothing to stop him from participating. He was only seventeen. He took your best friend from you."

That finally breaks something inside Night.

He tilts his head back, staring at the sky as a heavy sigh escapes him. For a long moment he says nothing, thinking it all through again.

So many people. So many unjust deaths.

How many lives had Nut destroyed?

And these were only the ones they knew about.

Even his best friend and classmate had died because of that man.

It was impossible to wrap his mind around it.

"I know you're all right," Night finally says quietly. "I'm not stupid. I can see this objectively. It's just…"

"You're attached to him because he's the only person who's ever been there in your life," Lim says calmly. "But that doesn't mean he deserves your feelings. Believe me, I know exactly what you're going through. I just reached the point where I don't care anymore."

"So you don't need my help with that part," Night murmurs, nodding slowly to himself. "You've all already made your decision. I won't stand in the way of your revenge… but I don't want to kill him. I don't need that."

"Actually," Norawit says, studying him closely, "you could still be very useful. Destroying his reputation would be a nice bonus. That way, after he dies, no one will be writing nonsense about what a wonderful man he was."

"Maybe we should just put him in prison?" Night asks one last time, trying to change their course.

“That wouldn’t be effective,” Damian replies in a calm, businesslike tone, as if they were discussing a project in his office. “Put emotions aside and think rationally.”

“Why not?”

“Partially it would work. He’d be arrested, his reputation would be destroyed. But it wouldn’t last long. His connections are endless. I’m certain he’d eventually find a way out, or keep running his operations from inside prison. He’d slip away again and clear his name somehow. And what’s our goal here?”

“To save them,” Night says quietly, glancing at Nattawat and Norawit.

“Exactly,” Damian nods. “And to do that, we have to destroy Powerslide for good. Not just the system, but its key element. Its creator. Only then will it be a real victory.”

“Then it will never happen again,” North whispers, staring emptily at his shoes.

“Exactly,” Lim says. “That’s what we need.”

“We wouldn’t just be protecting them,” Pahn adds, crossing her arms. “We’d be protecting every guy who would go through those trials next year, and every year after that. Sacrificing that bastard would save everyone else. I’m in, boys. If we don’t deal with him completely, he’ll find a way around everything. And when he does, we’ll all be in danger. You really think he wouldn’t figure out who betrayed him? He will. And then he’ll start eliminating us one by one.”

She smirks slightly.

“There’s no point unless we deal with him permanently. Ruining his reputation is only to open people’s eyes. It won’t stop Powerslide or the hunt for Norawit and North.”

“I’ve always said you’ve got a dangerously sexy brain,” Damian says with a small smile.

“Shut up and stay away from my girlfriend, playboy,” Phuwin snaps.

Lim rolls his eyes.

“Fine,” Night sighs at last, raising his hands in surrender. “You’re right. It has to be done. I’ll handle exposing him. That will be my strike against him. The rest is up to you.”

“Where do you have connections?” Nattawat asks.

“News networks and publishing houses. Fox News, CNN, USA Today, Los Angeles Times.”

Lim lifts his eyebrows in surprise.

“Even one of those would destroy him. But if we release it everywhere… perfect. That’ll work.”

“But we need to move carefully,” Norawit says. “If this leaks too early, Hwang might sense something and act.”

“Correct,” Lim nods. “This operation will take time. We’ll need the right people to spread the information properly. He has connections among journalists too. You and I will handle that,” he adds, glancing at Night. “Ideally, it should happen after the final race is announced, but we should prepare the ground beforehand.”

“Even better,” Pahn says with a sly smile. “Release everything during the race itself. He’ll be busy with the event while every channel broadcasts the truth about him. Newspapers will sell out instantly. He’ll panic, and in that moment he’ll be vulnerable.”

“And that’s when we carry out your plan to eliminate him,” Damian agrees.

“Does anyone here actually know what that plan is?” Phuwin asks, confused. “How exactly are we supposed to kill that monster and get close enough to him?”

Night exhales slowly.

“God… I don’t want to ruin this by letting my emotions get in the way,” he says quietly.

Then he turns away and gets into his car.

“So it’s better if I don’t hear the details.”

The engine roars to life. He slams the gas while still in place, then spins the car around in a sharp, dramatic turn, sending a cloud of dust from the roadside swirling into the evening air before speeding off.

Nattawat lets out a deep breath. He understands that it’s hard for his brother to accept all of this, but in the end it’s inevitable. This whole story can only end one way.

Of course they’re all right. Deep down, he knows it perfectly well.

If their father doesn’t die, none of this will ever end.

“So why don’t we just do it at his house?” Satang asks. “Nattawat could get inside.”

“First of all, we need to choose the right moment to expose him so we don’t immediately face the consequences of his rage. The best moment is during the race,” Jirochtikul replies, frowning slightly. “And second, that would be a huge risk. Probably even bigger than the race itself. His security is everywhere there, every second, and the house is surrounded by cameras. You’re overestimating what I can do. His guard dogs check on me too.”

“You’re right,” Lim says calmly. “That’s exactly where I can help you. During the race, the monitoring is usually handled only by him and me. There are no spectators present in person, and most of the security actually answers to me. Only a few of his men are there, and that can be dealt with if necessary.”

He pauses for a moment.

“The right timing will lower his guard significantly. He trusts me, while at home he’s always on alert. I can arrange a private, face-to-face meeting with him.”

“And how exactly would you do that?” Phuwin asks.

“We’ll both be in the monitoring center. From time to time, while we’re tracking the next stage of the race, I can step away to the control block. I check the system’s technical status, review errors, fix issues, or give commands. It’s a small room filled with screens and equipment. There’s usually very little security there.”

He glances around at them.

“At that moment, I can bring one of you into the building. Leave that part to me.”

“Me,” Norawit says immediately. “I want to do it myself.”

“That would be a problem,” Lim replies. “You need to be on the track so nothing raises suspicion.”

Norawit exhales in frustration, realizing the man is right.

“What about me?” North says.

“Couldn’t think of anything better?” the older Titicharoenrak says, raising an eyebrow. “The moment you see him, you’ll lose control. Your emotions will ruin everything.”

“Then I’ll do it,” Phuwin says, exchanging looks with the others.

“Baby…” Pahn warns quietly.

“I’m ready,” Phuwin replies firmly. “This race has to end in Pond’s honor. Norawit and Nattawat will finish it once and for all. And I’ll kill Hwang.”

“And after that we’ll disable the sensor controls that are still active inside you,” Damian adds, nodding thoughtfully. “Not bad. Once Hwang is dead, everything can be reprogrammed without consequences. But we still won’t be able to remove them. For that, the control units themselves would have to be destroyed.”

“What are the rest of us supposed to do?” North asks irritably.

“Stay out of it,” Norawit answers firmly, looking at him with a serious expression.

“I don’t want to just sit around doing nothing.”

“Neither do I,” Satang adds.

“The Alphas will handle a strong diversion,” Norawit explains. “Your job is to survive and keep racing until everything is over. The Dark Horse exposes him. The Life of the Party kills Hwang. The Hacker stays ready—her help might be necessary if something goes wrong.”

He glances at the last two.

“And you two—Teenager and Omega—stay out of it. Moral support is also important. If something goes wrong, you’ll step in and help.”

“I want to help for real,” the younger Titicharoenrak mutters irritably. “Give me something to do.”

“In your case, not interfering is already a big job,” Damian smirks. “Listen to your brother.”

“And since when are you the one giving orders here?” Phuwin asks sharply, stepping closer and lifting his chin defiantly. “What if in the end you just betray us and this whole plan goes to hell? Why should we trust you?”

Lim steps forward until they’re almost face to face, looking down at him with cool arrogance. The defiant fire in the younger man’s eyes clearly amuses him.

But he also likes the confidence.

People like that go far.

Angry ones go even farther.

“Oh God, are you two about to start fighting?” Norawit sighs, rolling his eyes. “Stop measuring egos. This isn’t the time.”

“I don’t trust him,” the cypher says coldly. “He’s not part of our family.”

“And you think I trust you?” Lim replies with an ironic smile. “What makes you think you won’t lose your nerve at the last second? What if you lower the gun when Hwang realizes what you’re planning?”

“I won’t back down.”

“You have no idea who he really is or how easily he can break you with just a look. Or do you think I’m afraid of him for no reason?”

His voice turns colder.

“I could kill him myself. But I can’t. That bastard is buried so deep inside me that I’ll never get him out. So save your anger for him. I have nothing to fight you over. We’re all here for the same reason. You’re protecting what matters to you. And I’m protecting what matters to me.”

“If you’re planning to play against us,” Phuwin says coldly, “I’ll kill both of you.”

He walks past him, deliberately shoving his shoulder.

Then he joins his girlfriend, wrapping an arm around her neck as he lights a cigarette. His eyes never leave Lim’s face, making it perfectly clear he’s not joking.

Everyone watches each other in tense silence.

They all know this plan is reckless and fragile. It could fall apart at any moment, turning everything upside down.

But they don't have time to come up with something better.

The race is approaching.

"And so," Damian says finally, looking around at them again, "let's repeat. I'll try to get one of you to Hwang."

"Night will pass the evidence to the journalists," Satang says with a nod.

"Norawit and I race and try to stay alive," Nattawat adds.

"I'll be ready with the laptop," Pahn says.

"I kill that bastard," Phuwin exhales, smoke leaving his nose in a pale cloud.

"And Satang and I just sit on the sidelines and stay out of the way," North finishes obediently.

"Sounds like a terrible suicide plan," Pahn sighs, pushing her hair back. "But it's still better than doing nothing."

"Yes," Satang agrees slowly. "It is. But there's one problem everyone seems to have forgotten."

"What?" Nattawat asks.

"Norawit doesn't have a car. He totaled the Porsche."

"Damn. Right," Nattawat mutters, frowning. "I forgot."

"I could provide you with one," Lim says. "You're my protégé in this race. No one would find it strange."

"No," Norawit says quietly. "Actually… I think I already have a car."

He glances to the side with a faint smile.

Everyone follows his gaze.

Near the fence stands Pond's Mazda, parked beside the memorial his friends and fellow street racers built in his honor. It had been brought here from Ojai after the funeral and left on the track as a tribute.

The car isn't the newest, but under the hood it's packed with carefully assembled parts. Pond spent years modifying it for racing. Fast, agile, perfectly responsive—exactly what's needed for the final race of Powerslide.

He hadn’t competed for a long time, which made releasing that car onto the track now feel almost sacred.

Especially since Norawit had already driven it several times before.

Getting used to it again would be easy.

“You want to…?” someone begins.

“Yes,” Norawit says firmly, nodding.

“He would’ve liked that,” Nattawat says with a small smile. “You ending all of this in his baby.”

“I will,” Norawit replies quietly.

“I’ll fulfill his last wish.”

The Powerslide track lay in the mountains outside Los Angeles, surrounded by breathtaking scenery and overlooking the endless stretch of the ocean. It was a winding serpentine road that cut across the hills, twisting and coiling like the body of a giant snake. The terrain was rough and unpredictable, filled with steep turns and tight loops that demanded absolute control. The natural ground and the countless dangerous curves could only be conquered by someone who truly mastered extreme driving and drifting. Now it was easy to understand why the track carried that name.

Naturally, the most dangerous stage had been saved for the very end. Controlled drifting was an essential part of the final—the most important stage of all. Only the very best could handle it. But as everyone already knew, the winner here was determined by far more than just skill.

At the very top of the hill stood a closed section of paved road. At first glance it seemed several times larger than the Loop, which meant the distance alone would be brutal. The instructions were simple: once the racers climbed the entire ascending route, they would still have to complete three full laps around the track at the summit. It was going to be a long race. And far from an easy one.

From where he stood, Norawit could see the flat rooftops of the buildings at the top of the complex. There were only two of them, built from gray brick that matched the tall concrete fence surrounding the perimeter. Each was three stories high and almost completely

windowless, resembling watchtowers in some grim prison. The only things missing were floodlights and armed guards.

Though, if he was honest, Norawit was almost certain those guards were already inside.

At that moment he felt unexpectedly grateful that a large part of his training had taken place in Ojai. It wasn't exactly the same, but at least it meant he wouldn't be completely lost in the mountains on unfamiliar terrain during such a brutal race. Still, it wouldn't be easy. He had no idea what kind of madness those sick bastards had prepared this time. Maybe they wouldn't complicate an already dangerous race any further. The course itself would look spectacular regardless.

Yet for some reason he couldn't shake the feeling that plenty of surprises were waiting for them.

All he could do was hope none of those surprises would cost them their lives.

Norawit inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the cold mountain air, rich with the scent of salt and ocean wind. His gaze drifted along the road that stretched ahead.

It would be difficult.

Just thinking about it made something inside him tremble uneasily.

This was the final race. And if he survived it, he doubted he would ever compete again.

The road itself looked almost like a national treasure—beautiful, winding, carefully maintained. It was the kind of place where you would want to unleash your car at full speed, simply for the thrill of it. But not like this. Not under these conditions.

The landscape around it was breathtaking, vast and untouched. And yet there was no civilization anywhere in sight. For dozens of kilometers in every direction there was nothing but forest, hills, empty coastline, and endless trees.

The place felt wild. Untamed. As if no one had ever truly conquered it.

No one even knew if this track had ever produced a real winner.

But it was easy to imagine how many young racers had died here—chasing adrenaline, chasing glory. They came looking for fame and excitement, and instead found death waiting for them in the mountains.

And this madness had to end.

Most of the road was built around steep peaks. Driving along the ridge would feel like leaping from one turn to the next across rocky cliffs. In reality, the terrain was a massive fractured block of land that had been pushed upward over time and then carved apart by rivers and rain. The erosion had created sharp drops and dangerous edges that now lined the track.

No one knew how Damian had discovered this place.

But for something this insane, it was perfect.

Just looking at it made the blood roar in Norawit's veins.

It was terrifying.

And yet turning back was no longer an option.

None of the three remaining finalists had any chance of escape. Any attempt at sabotage would be noticed immediately. The devices implanted in their necks made that painfully clear. Through those things, any command could be executed at any moment.

No one wanted to openly challenge Hwang without a plan.

They needed strategy. Careful, calculated strategy.

Which meant, for now, they had to pretend they were playing by his rules.

This race would be the most dangerous of them all. One mistake, one overlooked detail, one unpredictable variable—and everything could end in disaster.

For example, with a plunge straight into a cliff.

Each of them now stood alone against the reality of this place, where even the smallest detail could become fatal.

With a heavy ache tightening around his heart, Norawit looked at the car waiting for him today.

And suddenly he remembered the day he first met Pond.

That had been the first time he came to race at the Loop. Back then he was nothing more than an inexperienced kid. The track wasn't nearly as polished as it was now. A few years ago it had been nothing but an abandoned stadium.

He would never forget the arrogant smirk on Pond's face as he sat behind the wheel of this very car. The sharp, almost mocking look in his eyes had infuriated Norawit at the time.

When Pond casually suggested he join the race, Norawit had answered by flipping him off.

Pond's response had been simple.

"Learn how to drive first, loser."

And that had been the end of the conversation.

Back then, Norawit really didn't have the skill for real street racing. He had failed miserably in his first race, humiliating himself in front of everyone.

But later, when his youthful pride had cooled, he began to understand something.

Pond hadn't been mocking him.

He had been pushing him.

Challenging him to become better.

And Norawit had returned a year later—stronger, faster, ready.

Before long he became the best rider on motorcycles at the Loop. No one could match him. He was even starting to rival his boyfriend, who everyone called the drift king of Los Angeles.

And now he was standing here as a participant in Powerslide.

It was insane.

Pond had believed in him long before anyone else did. Even before Norawit himself understood what this race really was. A month ago he hadn't even been this good yet, but Pond had still believed in his victory.

Which meant he had to win today.

For him.

The white Mazda, tuned carefully under its owner's strict supervision, looked like something straight out of a racing video game. The suspension, the rear spoiler, the colorful airbrushed paint, the glowing wheel lights—everything about the car screamed that it had been born for racing.

Yet somehow it didn't look cheap or flashy.

Instead it carried the unique spirit of Japanese street racing culture—the kind Nattawat used to tell him about. Nattawat had seen plenty of cars like this while living and training in Osaka.

The front of the Mazda resembled the snarling face of a predator, its narrow headlights forming a cunning, dangerous squint. The sleek lines of the hood only made the car look more aggressive.

And yet, strangely, it was beautiful.

The car itself was old, but under the hood it had been rebuilt almost entirely. Performance-wise it could rival many modern vehicles.

The perfectly balanced rear-wheel drive, the carefully tuned suspension, the precise steering—all of it gave Pond that feeling he always described: the unity between rider and horse.

That was why he affectionately called the car his little horse.

This Mazda wasn't something you could just buy at a dealership. Every part of it had been assembled by Pond's own skilled hands. It was something truly special.

But it had never raced in anything remotely this extreme.

Bringing it here felt almost cruel.

Like locking a wild animal inside a cage.

Around seven hundred horsepower. Racing headers. An aluminum block. A custom exhaust system carefully tuned for specific engine speeds, designed to squeeze out the absolute maximum performance within a precise RPM range. On paper, it sounded like the perfect partner.

But in truth, all of that was just a collection of impressive words. The real magic of the car wasn't its raw power. It was the thrill it delivered, the way it responded to every movement, the perfect balance of control and freedom while it was still alive and breathing beneath the driver's hands. Its true strength was endurance racing combined with the light, precise maneuverability needed for drifting.

Exactly what was needed tonight.

Norawit had never been so grateful that he'd chosen the right car.

He runs his hand slowly along the roof of the Mazda, then gives it a soft pat, as if wishing both of them good luck before the race.

"She won't let you down," Nattawat says, walking up beside him. "This little beauty was made to win someday. Trust me."

"I know," Titicharoenrak replies quietly. "It's just… this really will be the last race of my life in a car. I doubt I'll ever want to do this again." He pauses, a sly smile tugging at his lips. "Unless it's against you. For a bet."

"So you're going back to bikes?" Nattawat asks.

"If I survive."

"We'll both survive. Everything will work out. The main thing is getting rid of the only real opponent. After that, it's all you. You'll beat me in seconds," Nattawat says, gently taking hold of his wrist.

Carefully, he ties a white bandana with black patterns around it, something that once belonged to their mutual friend. Then he softly strokes Norawit's hand and smiles at him with quiet encouragement.

"For luck. You're going to need it. Let him be with you today."

"You're right," Norawit says, nodding as he takes a deep breath. "Thank you."

“No need. Just don’t swing the rear too hard. Dirt road, cliffs… just be careful.”

“You be careful too, baby,” Titicharoenrak replies, pulling him into an embrace.

Nattawat immediately closes his eyes and breathes in the familiar scent of Norawit’s caramel skin, always carrying that strange mix of sweet watermelon and cigarette smoke. He gently rubs his nose against his neck and tightens his arms around the familiar waist.

This is the support they both need more than anything else. More powerful than any words.

They stand like that for several quiet minutes, simply holding each other, enjoying the warmth of the moment.

Their opponent waits off to the side of the road. Pahn stands ready, monitoring their connection. She’ll be guiding them again tonight, just in case. This time Damian knows about it—in fact, it’s part of their shared plan. Her mind might be needed as backup.

Phuwin waits for the signal in a hidden spot near the Powerslide track. His task tonight might be the most important of all.

And right now Night is negotiating with journalists. Soon enough, Hwang will be exposed.

“I hate to interrupt your romantic little moment,” Pahn’s voice suddenly crackles through their earpieces, “but let’s do a roll call. Time’s running out. Three minutes until the start. I need to know everyone’s ready. I’m in position.”

“I’m here,” Nattawat replies reluctantly, stepping back from Norawit. “Getting into the car.”

“I hear you too. I’m ready,” Norawit says, opening the driver’s door.

“Baby?” Pahn asks.

“Yeah, I’m here, sweetheart,” Phuwin answers, the smug grin almost audible in his voice.

“Good. Satang’s with me, providing moral support. He even prepared some sedatives in case I start hysterically panicking.”

The guys chuckle quietly. They all know Pahn can be a real demon sometimes—especially when something isn’t working. It pushes her to perform better, but when she gets angry, she’s louder than all of them combined.

“Where’s North?” Norawit asks.

“He’s supporting me,” Phuwin answers.

“Idiot,” North laughs. “You just forgot your gun. I had to save your ass. Who goes on a job and forgets their weapon?”

“Connection’s breaking up. I can’t hear half the nonsense you’re saying,” Phuwin mutters.

“Moron,” Nattawat laughs.

“I’m here too, guys,” Night says breathlessly. “Everything’s almost ready. I’m running around the CNN office building.”

“Perfect. Everyone’s here,” Pahn says.

“Everyone except one,” Phuwin adds. “What about Tony Stark?”

“He’s not connected to us,” Nattawat replies.

“Right,” Pahn confirms. “It’s too dangerous for him to talk to us while he’s near that bastard. But he’s here. We checked through a secondary channel. He can connect and disconnect whenever necessary.”

“Just so everyone knows,” Phuwin says darkly, “I don’t trust him. My gut says something’s wrong. I’ve got a feeling he’ll screw us over. People in Tom Ford suits are always bastards.”

“Oh, stop it,” Norawit groans. “It’s too late to worry about that. We’re starting the operation.”

“You know what, idiot?” a new voice suddenly cuts in. “I don’t trust you either.”

Damian.

“And yes,” Lim adds coolly, “I’m here too.”

“I was hoping you couldn’t hear us,” Phuwin says. “But I’m not taking it back.”

“You seriously think that could hurt me?” Damian scoffs.

“You annoy me.”

“I made a mistake calling you the life of the party once. You’re a pain in everyone’s ass.”

“Go to hell. You’re just not part of our crowd.”

“Idiot. Don’t stick your head out too early. Wait for the signal. I can’t talk much, I’m being watched. See you soon,” Lim says, cutting the connection.

“Show-off,” Phuwin mutters.

“Well… he is actually smart,” Pahn says.

“Alright, enough joking,” Nattawat says, glancing at the timer. “It’s time.”

“The final race. For Pond,” Phuwin says quietly.

“Yes,” Norawit whispers, running his hand over the Mazda’s steering wheel. “For Pond.”

The three racers take their positions calmly at the starting line.

Norawit glances at the timer and watches the last ten seconds ticking down. He starts the engine and revs it, focusing intensely on the moment ahead.

Soon it will all be over.

But no one knows how.

These moments might be the last of his life. He knows that perfectly well. And the truth is—he's terrified.

Something could go wrong. An accident, a trap set by the organizers, a sudden betrayal.

No one can guarantee that Damian won't betray them at the last second.

They couldn't rely on him at a moment like this.

But they had to.

There was no other choice.

At the very least, he had access to everything, including Hwang himself. Even if he couldn't kill the man personally, he could give them the chance to do it.

No one could say with certainty whose side Lim was really on.

He was a mystery.

Did he truly want to protect Nattawat?

Damian was no hero. He was a villain in his own right, responsible for many terrible things. He had caused all of them pain. In many ways, it was because of him that they were here now.

But he had also been acting under immense pressure.

Over time he had shown different sides of himself, never revealing the whole truth to anyone. Not once had he shown his real face to another living soul.

The only faint hope was that people like him were always driven by selfish motives.

And if someone like that ever formed a real attachment, emotional or physical, it could change everything.

Because a man with that kind of overwhelming ego would destroy the entire world just to protect the one thing he considered truly his.

And that one thing was the only thing that mattered.

No one wanted to feel betrayed at the end of this race.

Despite their complicated relationship with Lim, they were giving him a chance. They were choosing to believe him.

But he could still betray them.

On purpose.

Or because something simply went wrong.

No one knew which it would be.

That only makes the tension worse. The pressure from every side tightens around their nerves until it becomes almost unbearable. It's terrifying, almost the same kind of dread Norawit felt the moment Titicharoenrak once drove straight toward a train with no brakes. All of them are simply moving forward now, guided by instinct alone, unable to influence the circumstances closing in around them.

Norawit understands perfectly well that there will be some kind of trap this time too. But Lim had promised he would find a way to warn Pahn the moment the prepared program for the race participants came into play. All they can do is hope he manages it, because he's taking a risk as well. Cheating right under Hwang's nose is a dangerous game—but he's willing to try.

Suddenly a siren blares through the entire car, signaling the start. All three vehicles launch forward at the same moment, leaving behind thick clouds of dust and dark smoke. Gravel and sand crackle beneath the tires as they struggle for traction at the start, wheels spinning for a split second before the race truly begins.

They're positioned at the foot of a hill, and gaining the lead right away is crucial. If someone falls behind here, overtaking later will be incredibly difficult. The narrow road snakes upward along the hillside, barely wide enough for two cars side by side. Most of the time they'll have to drive carefully in single file. The frequent turns make passing nearly impossible, so if they don't take the lead now, the only chance will be at the main stretch at the top.

As expected, Nattawat breaks ahead almost immediately. Their rival in the red Ferrari follows in second place, while Norawit stays close behind them.

The cars begin climbing the hill, engines roaring loudly as their tires carve dark tracks into the dirt. No one dares to push the speed too far yet. This race clearly isn't about pure speed. It's about endurance.

It's not enough to simply finish the route quickly. They have to do it carefully. In fact, slower is safer here, because every mistake could mean death.

The real acceleration will happen at the top.

Nattawat keeps glancing at Norawit's car, afraid something could go wrong, that he might lose control and plunge off the cliff.

But Norawit is handling it perfectly.

He has learned to drive so well that he’s no longer behind racers who have trained for years. The Mazda pulls right up behind the Ferrari, sticking to it like a shadow, refusing to let the other driver gain even a few centimeters.

Their opponent is trapped.

Nattawat blocks him from the front, preventing the Ferrari from breaking free, while Norawit presses close from behind.

The first two turns pass relatively smoothly in this formation. The angle of entry is comfortable, and one after another they slide through controlled drifts before straightening out again.

A few minutes later Norawit manages to pull half a car length ahead. Now he’s driving side by side with the red sports car on a brief stretch of straight road.

It’s a dangerous move.

Two cars are racing shoulder to shoulder on a narrow mountain road, and another turn is approaching fast.

Norawit keeps his eyes locked on his opponent. But the other driver doesn’t dare act aggressively either, because he’s the one closest to the edge of the hill. If anything goes wrong, he’ll be the first to fly off the cliff.

At that moment everyone watching is unbelievably tense.

Their friends observing from afar.
Even Damian, who is currently standing inside the building near the Powerslide track.

He glances anxiously between the race and the cold, furious profile of his father standing just a meter away from him, and he knows he doesn’t like what he’s seeing.

Usually, his father’s quiet anger ends in catastrophe.

Right now, it would be better if Norawit kept his temper in check, but Damian has no way of warning him.

No one says a word.

They’re all afraid that even a sound might ruin everything.

All they can hear through their headsets is the heavy breathing of Nattawat and Norawit as they fight for their lives and for victory. The tension rises with every passing second, multiplying until it becomes suffocating.

Each heartbeat pounds painfully against their ribs, echoing loudly in their heads.

Everyone is afraid of how this reckless race might end.

Pahn stares at her laptop screen, watching high-quality live footage from several cameras at once. The racers are being filmed from multiple angles, framed beautifully against the evening ocean and the fading sunset.

At first glance, it looks like a scene straight out of a Hollywood racing movie.

Lim truly did an impressive job setting everything up.

But Pahn knows very well that this isn't a movie.

Inside those cars are her best friends, racing against death.

"Hey… what does that mean?" Satang suddenly asks, pointing at the map displayed at the bottom of the screen.

Pahn's frightened eyes dart to the map, and her brow immediately furrows.

Blue pulsating dots have appeared along the route, moving directly toward the racers.

She instantly understands what it means.

Still, she quickly taps several keys on her laptop to confirm it.

Yes.

Her thoughts were right.

Those markers exist only on her screen. Someone has just made a significant change to the system, and only on one section of the route.

Which means this is clearly a signal meant specifically for her.

A warning.

Lim quietly closes the window on his tablet at that very moment and adopts a casual expression so that Hwang won't suspect anything.

"Oh shit," Pahn whispers, adjusting her earpiece. "Guys. Code red."

"What does that mean?" Satang asks again anxiously.

"Damian," Pahn replies quickly. "He showed me. It's a signal."

"What's going on?" Norawit asks over the radio.

"There's a problem ahead. Someone prepared a surprise right after the next turn."

"Well, what would we do without surprises," Nattawat mutters darkly. "What kind this time?"

"On the map I see blue pulsating markers moving toward you. You're going to cross paths with them on a blind turn," Pahn explains quickly. "Most likely… cars."

“Shit!” Norawit shouts.

But instead of falling back, he pushes harder, trying to overtake the rival and secure a better position in the race.

“Baby, be careful. The turn is close,” Nattawat warns.

“I’ll make it.”

“And if you don’t?”

“Trust me. I can handle it.”

He slams the gear shift forward and accelerates.

Meanwhile, Phuwin and North can’t see the race directly from where they are, but they can hear the engines nearby.

The wild roar of the Mustang and the deeper growl of Pond’s Mazda are impossible to confuse with anything else.

They know something bad is happening.

But they stay silent over the radio, refusing to distract Pahn with questions. Instead, they trust her intelligence, and the guys’ skills.

Pahn sits frozen before the screen, eyes locked on the blue dots growing closer and closer to her friends.

Their collision course tightens with every passing second.

With every heartbeat.

She presses a hand over her mouth, terrified of witnessing the worst possible outcome.

In her mind she can already see it: a catastrophic crash.

Norawit still hasn’t moved out of the oncoming lane.

They’re almost at the very top of the hill now. Only three sharp turns remain.

And yet some unknown danger is rushing straight toward them.

But Norawit stubbornly keeps pushing forward, trying to claim the leading position behind Nattawat.

His pride refuses to let him stay behind.

For a moment, time seems to stop.

In the suffocating silence, the only sound is the frantic pounding of frightened hearts. It beats wildly like a bird trapped in a cage, desperate to escape.

All they can do now is pray, to anyone who might be listening, that this ends without disaster.

Satang grips Pahn's hand tightly, intertwining their fingers. He stares at the screen just as intensely, eyes fixed on the map.

They know exactly how many seconds remain before the encounter.

The countdown echoes in their heads.

Five.

Four.

Three.

"Oh God… come on, Norawit," Pahn whispers, her voice trembling. "Careful…"

Nattawat presses harder on the gas pedal, creating just enough space behind him.

And exactly two seconds before the oncoming cars appear around the bend, the Mazda finally slides into the position Norawit has been chasing so stubbornly.

He steals the lead from their rival right under his nose.

And Nattawat lets out a breath of relief—if only for a single moment.

With a deft, precise movement, Titicharoenrak squeezes his car between the Mustang and the Ferrari, slipping out of the path of the prepared "suicide drivers." A whole chain of cars suddenly bursts toward them at high speed, like bowling balls rolling down a lane while the racers themselves are the pins meant to be knocked down.

Nattawat doesn't panic. Instead, he smoothly eases off the gas and shifts slightly to the side. Norawit mirrors the maneuver perfectly, following his lead with the same calm precision, he had known about this setup in advance too. The red sports car behind them, however, visibly loses control. It struggles through the turn and is forced to slow down. The attacking cars thunder down the hill after them, their ambush failing.

The Ferrari, startled, brakes right in the middle of the road but quickly roars back to life and pulls aside, clearing the lane. The driver has fallen far behind his rivals now and will have to fight hard to catch up.

A brief calm follows.

Nattawat accelerates again, gliding through the penultimate turn with unbelievable ease and exhilaration, and Titicharoenrak sticks to him like a shadow. Once again they move as if they are a single machine, tracing the exact same line across the road, just like during their paired training sessions.

At the peak of the sharp curve, Nattawat keeps the revs high, throwing the car into a controlled drift and sliding into the turn sideways with beautiful precision. The Mazda glides beside him effortlessly, and the sight alone allows him to breathe a little easier.

For now, it's just the two of them.

But sooner or later their enemy will catch up. This is only a temporary reprieve.

Leaving nothing behind but clouds of dust from spinning tires and the furious roar of overheated engines, they surge forward toward the track and reach the top of the hill. It almost feels like the race is nearing its end, but something deep inside whispers that this is only the beginning.

Three massive laps still lie ahead of them, and no one is going to let them drive them peacefully.

"Guys, another group of suicide drivers," Pahn says anxiously over the radio. "Three signals. Looks like one for each of you."

Barely a second later, three black cars burst out from behind the final blind turn.

She's right. This time each of them has their own target.

One car speeds straight past them. The second tries to force Nattawat off the road, but he slips away from the collision with ease and slams the accelerator. His Mustang swings its rear end beautifully and leaves the attacker confused in his wake.

The third car barrels directly toward the Mazda with Norawit inside.

In that moment, he has no more than five seconds to decide.

He needs to predict the right move, otherwise he'll end up as nothing more than twisted metal flying off the cliff. His mind sharpens instantly. Years of training have taught him not to rush in moments like this, but to wait for the exact instant when the right maneuver becomes possible.

"Why are you hesitating? Hit the gas!" Nattawat shouts, staring into his rearview mirror.

"Too early," Titicharoenrak replies calmly, gripping the handbrake tightly in his palm. "Less emotion. More technique."

"Norawit! Move!" Pahn cries in alarm.

Norawit waits one heartbeat longer.

Then he catches the perfect moment.

Just as the suicide driver lunges to strike, Norawit taps the brakes and slips away from the collision. The back of his car skids slightly, but he immediately spins the wheel in the right

direction and straightens out. A second later he slams the accelerator and glides smoothly into the turn, yanking the handbrake.

The car slides sideways like silk, skimming dangerously close to the edge of the cliff before snapping back into line under his precise control.

Nattawat watches it all with open admiration, shaking his head.

It feels as if a massive weight drops from his chest. For a moment there he'd nearly lost his mind with worry, but Norawit handles it flawlessly.

"You're insane," Nattawat says, though a proud, uncontrollable smile curls across his lips.

"You're the one who taught me," Titicharoenrak replies with a satisfied grin as he presses the boost.

The Mazda surges forward, quickly catching up to the Mustang. Within seconds it pulls alongside him, their cars racing side by side as they drive onto the Powerslide track together, ready to finish this cursed race once and for all.

⛧°. ⋆ ⋟⊰✣⊱⋞ ⋆. °⛧

Damian had been staring at the row of screens in front of him for several minutes now, already sensing what was about to happen. A hurricane named Hwang was about to sweep through the room with his fury, tearing through everything in its path and sparing absolutely no one.

Technically and visually, the stunt on the track had been flawless. Spectacular, even. But not everyone watching felt thrilled by it.

The anger of the man standing beside him seemed to seep into the smoke-filled air like bitterness. It grew heavy instantly, settling in the lungs like molten lead. Damian had expected this the moment he sent the girl that warning. Now Hwang was livid that things hadn't gone according to plan.

Over the years, Lim had learned him far too well. Those sudden explosions of emotion had often been directed straight at him, so by now he reacted almost calmly. Being the scapegoat was nothing new. It had always been his father's favorite habit, unloading his rage on someone else.

Outwardly he remained indifferent, but inside something still twisted painfully. That old, familiar vulnerability crept back in.

Nuthwang stared at the screen, his face distorted with fury. He watched as the bets on Titicharoenrak skyrocketed within seconds. Which meant only one thing: the priority had shifted. Now people wanted to see Titicharoenrak win, not die.

The clients wanted a beautiful finish.

Stunts like that always worked in the driver's favor with the audience. They impressed people, made them throw down tens of thousands just to witness something like it again.

But Damian already knew that even millions wouldn't stop the man beside him from killing someone tonight.

The sharp crash of shattering glass made him grimace, though he didn't flinch.

He wasn't surprised.

Right on schedule—the breakdown started seconds later.

Fragments of glass scattered across the marble floor, coming to rest near Damian's shoes. He looked down at them thoughtfully. In a burst of rage, Hwang had smashed his whiskey glass against the floor. At least this time it hadn't been against Damian's head. That had happened before.

The man growled now, low and vicious, like a wild animal hungry for blood. Even his breathing seemed poisoned with lethal venom. If he were a snake, he might have strangled himself with the sheer intensity of his own fury.

But by now Damian barely reacted.

A faint smirk appeared on his lips as he lifted his head and met the scorching glare directed at him.

"What the hell was that?" Nuthwang shouted. "What was that supposed to be?!"

"A spectacular stunt," Lim replied coolly, setting his tablet down on the table.

"What the hell did he just do?!" Hwang barked. "He was supposed to die!"

"Apparently Titicharoenrak is a better driver than we thought."

"You told me the opposite!"

"He used to be. But he's been trained by Nattawat. What did you expect?" Lim asked calmly, turning toward him.

"I expected him to die tonight!" Nuthwang roared. "Instead my perfect plan failed, and that idiot in the Ferrari is out of the race! What is he, a damn cat with nine lives?! Who the hell

does he think he is, always getting in my way?!”

The slap came without warning.

Nuthwang struck him across the face with brutal force.

“What is going on?!” he shouted. “Did you screw up again?! Are you setting me up again?!”

Another blow followed.

“How many times do I have to trust you with everything only to be disappointed again? How many damn times?! You keep screwing up!”

Lim’s head snapped sharply to the side, his cheek burning with pain. He drew in a slow breath and closed his eyes for a moment, saying nothing.

Every time this happened, his right hand instinctively clenched into a fist.

But he never raised it.

He could never bring himself to fight back while looking into those eyes. He always lost. Always denied himself the chance to truly challenge this man.

It would be pointless anyway.

You couldn’t defeat someone like him with a thousand weak punches. Only one decisive blow could end it. One precise, carefully planned strike.

And tonight—that strike would finally be made.

“Why are you silent, you pathetic piece of trash?” Hwang spat, grabbing him by the jaw and forcing his face upward. “You promised me a perfect race. Didn’t you? Last time you blamed a technical failure. What’s your excuse now?”

“Everything went according to plan,” Damian said calmly, still not looking up. “Titicharoenrak just performed better than I expected.”

“You useless boy! Brain-dead brat!” the man shouted in his face. “Why haven’t I killed you yet?”

“I ask myself that every day,” Damian murmured.

“Shut up! Fix this immediately!” Nuthwang snapped, striking him again.

This slap hurt less physically, but it was far more humiliating.

Each time, with that simple gesture, his own father ground him deeper into the dirt, crushing what remained of his pride.

And yet every time Lim forced himself to remain composed, determined to show that he was no longer the weak child he had once been.

That was the difference between them.

He still had dignity.

Hwang raised his hand again, this time forming a fist.

Before it could land, Damian stepped calmly to the side, brushing his hair back and letting out a slow breath.

Once again he locked his emotions away behind heavy doors inside his soul, becoming the cold creature the man before him had spent years carefully creating.

He lifted his eyes at last.

For a moment, he resisted—just a little.

Their gazes collided.

Damian's icy ocean-blue eyes met the dark brown ones across from him. For nearly a minute they held their ground, neither willing to look away first.

Hwang saw the defiance in his son's gaze, and it infuriated him.

He knew exactly how much power he held over him.

In a single second his expression transformed into something quietly terrifying—and the effect was immediate.

Damian faltered.

His will broke once again.

This was exactly what he had told the others about.

This was the force that could bring him to his knees, and it wasn't even physical strength.

Fear crept in instantly.

The rebellion inside him collapsed, and he lowered his head obediently.

"I can't fix it," Lim said quietly, picking up the tablet. "They're entering the final laps. The race will be over soon. Whoever wins, you'll still profit."

"No!" Hwang shouted. "You know why I started all this! You know why I dragged Titicharoenrak into it! Kill him!"

"There are no more prepared trials. All the other opponents have been eliminated."

"All of them, you say?" Nuthwang asked, glancing at the screens with a satisfied hum. "No. You're mistaken."

“What are you planning?” Damian asked cautiously.

“If our plan failed,” Hwang said slowly, “make Nattawat do it.”

“What?!” Damian exclaimed, stunned. “Have you lost your mind?!”

“Use him. That’s an order,” Hwang said coldly.

“You’re really willing to go that far?” Damian asked, horrified. “What is wrong with you? He’s your son!”

“Was that defense I heard?” Nuthwang said slowly, turning toward him. “I swear to God, if you’re somehow involved in this sabotage…”

“I’m not.”

“Are you sure? Or did you suddenly decide to protect your little brother? You said you ran into him by accident.”

“No,” Damian replied calmly. “I’m protecting your reputation. If Nattawat dies, the media might start asking questions about—”

“I can silence journalists,” Hwang interrupted sharply. “Stay out of things that don’t concern you, you little bastard. Just do your job.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“You’re thinking about the wrong things again. Do I need to remind you of your place?”

“No.”

“Don’t make me be rough with you, my boy,” the man said mockingly, patting the cheek that was still burning. “Give the order.”

“No,” Lim said, turning his head away.

“Did I hear you correctly?” Nuthwang laughed quietly. “Do your job. Or you’ll regret it.”

“It’s not reasonable right now—”

“Now! Kill Titicharoenrak!”

“Hwang—”

“Use Nattawat!”

“Father—”

“Shut your mouth, you brainless creature!” Hwang roared, pressing a gun against his forehead. “No one, neither you nor anyone else, will ruin my plans for that bastard. You’re

not grown enough to tell me what to do. Press the damn button and activate Nattawat's device."

"This will be the biggest mistake of your life," Damian whispered, breathing heavily.

"Do it."

"You think I won't touch you because I still need you?" Hwang said coldly. "The race is almost over. After that I won't need you anymore."

He paused.

"One."

"Hwang, you—"

"Two."

With a flick of his finger, Nuthwang released the safety on the gun.

Damian looked at him for a few seconds.

Then he lowered his gaze obediently to the tablet.

Without attracting attention, he activated his earpiece through a few quick commands in the program and connected to the team's communication channel.

Their voices filled his ear—tense, urgent.

The evidence had already been delivered to the journalists. A broadcast exposing everything was being prepared at this very moment.

Everything was ready.

There was no turning back now.

No one could have predicted that Nattawat would become the vulnerable link in this race. That changed everything. Under the device's influence, he could easily kill Titicharoenrak—and destroy himself in the process.

That couldn't happen.

Which meant it was finally time to destroy the monster standing beside him.

"What are you waiting for?!" Hwang shouted.

Damian exhaled slowly and continued pressing commands on the tablet.

His father had no idea what he was actually doing.

In those few seconds Damian carried out two crucial actions that would lead to the man's downfall.

First, he sent Pahn detailed instructions on how to reprogram Nattawat's "Blast" device so he wouldn't kill his boyfriend on the track.

And at the same time, he triggered the signal that would begin the operation that would end Nuthwang's reign.

Everything that followed would weigh on his conscience.

But he would keep his promise.

He would help them.

His role in all of this was to protect them, and right now he believed this was the only way.

Risky, yes.

But worth it.

He had to activate the device to buy them time and distract Nuthwang with the race.

So he pressed the final command.

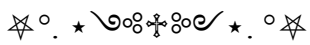
A notification appeared on the screen.

Task completed.

"It's done," Damian said firmly, looking straight at the man in front of him.

But his words were meant for everyone listening on the other end of the line.

"Let's begin."



It was a command to act.

From that moment on, there was no turning back, not for him, and not for the so-called "avengers." Those words had started an invisible countdown, ticking steadily toward the

moment when everything would finally come to an end.

Lim knew the little hacker would figure out the Blast technology sooner or later. That was exactly why he had entrusted her with such a difficult task. For him to deal with it personally right now would be nearly impossible. Two watchful eyes, belonging to that hellspawn who burned everything around him with his suffocating presence, were constantly fixed on him.

But his main task lay elsewhere.

This had to end once and for all, and for that he had his own plan, one the others didn't know about yet. He had to lie to them so everything would go smoothly. In a way, he still needed all of them for the operation.

Their goals weren't exactly the same.

They wanted revenge. They wanted to save their friends.

Damian, however, wanted to destroy the very thing he had once helped create, and by doing so, protect Nattawat from their deranged father.

There was only one way to do it: destroy the system and Hwang himself in a single, devastating strike. Otherwise, this war would never truly end.

After all, there was always the risk that the bastard had loyal followers. The filthy business had been extremely profitable for years, and someone out there could easily benefit from keeping it alive. That meant they couldn't allow this twisted survival game to resurface one day with a new cast of victims.

If the race were ever restarted, the devices embedded in the boys' necks could once again become a serious problem. Simply disabling them wouldn't be enough. The system could always reconnect them when the next race began.

The devices had to be removed—safely.

In Damian's mind there was a plan forming, crude and dangerously insane. But it might be the only possible option.

He was certain it could help Nattawat.

To make it happen, though, he needed time. And more importantly—a powerful distraction.

Fortunately, the distraction was already unfolding across the screens.

His father was watching the race with undisguised anticipation, eager to witness Titicharoenrak's bloody end. That obsession gave Damian the opportunity to carry out his idea quietly, without attracting attention.

All he had to do was slip away to the control center, the place where all the technical infrastructure of Powerslide was located, and complete the most important part of the operation.

Hwang wouldn't follow him. The man was far too busy waiting to see Norawit die.

All Damian had to do was take the risk now.

Lim cast a quick glance at the screens in front of him, then at the satisfied smirk on his father's face, a smile that promised nothing good for anyone involved. He locked his tablet and took a slow, steady breath.

"I need to step away for a moment. I have to check something," he said calmly, careful not to raise suspicion.

"Something wrong?" the man asked without even turning around.

"Yes. The signal is acting up in several sectors. It might affect the broadcast quality—visual glitches, interference, static. I might need to restart a couple of surveillance systems and check the module—"

"Go," Hwang interrupted coldly, his lips curling into a bloodthirsty smile. He nodded toward one of the guards. "Make sure the viewers are satisfied. This is going to be spectacular. Don't take long."

"Of course," Damian replied, already heading for the exit.

The moment he turned away and stepped through the double doors into the corridor, a satisfied grin spread across his face.

So far, everything was going perfectly—clean, quiet, unnoticed. The first step had been surprisingly easy.

But the hardest part was still ahead.

His father trusted him, and that trust was his greatest advantage. Hwang was convinced that the obedient dog he had trained for years would never turn against him.

And that would be his fatal mistake.

You should never underestimate your enemies. Sometimes they stand far closer than you realize.

Over the years, Damian had worked his way into the circle of people Hwang checked last. That very fact would be the man's downfall today.

For now, he suspected nothing.

Sooner or later, Hwang would notice his absence. By then it would be far too late to stop anything.

Everything would already be falling apart.

For the moment, Damian had just enough time to let his partner into the building—
and then blow the entire Powerslide system to hell.

⛧°. ⋆ ೄྀ⸙ೄྀ ⋆. °⛧

Norawit pushes the car hard along the smooth stretch of track, keeping perfectly level with Nattawat. He gives him nothing—not in speed, not in skill. The two of them move with careful precision, perfectly synchronized, both of them tense as they wait to see what else this place has in store for them.

Only three long laps remain.

But everything has to end before they cross the finish line.

Phuwin will kill that bastard, and then Titicharoenrak will finish the race with an easy victory in Pond's car. While they keep racing, their team needs to try to disable the control devices, and when there's no longer any chance to influence them, they'll carry out the most important part of this mission.

Destroy Hwang.

All they need to do is hold out until the right moment, until that creature finally gets the punishment he deserves.

For a brief second, Norawit lets his mind wander from the road, lost in his thoughts. But he quickly snaps back to reality when he notices a strange movement in the side mirror.

Something is wrong.

He immediately catches the shift in Nattawat's driving.

For some reason, Nattawat starts slowing down, softly braking and falling behind him for no apparent reason. His car drifts backward and settles directly behind the Mazda's rear bumper, almost glued to it, even though there's more than enough space on the track for both of them.

Norawit frowns in confusion and shifts gears, accelerating.

What the hell is he doing?

It almost looks like Nattawat is handing him the victory.

But that can't be it.

Nattawat Jirochtikul isn't the type to go easy. He never does, even during practice. So why would he suddenly do something like this in the middle of a race?

The answer comes moments later.

Nattawat brakes just enough to line himself up, then suddenly slams the accelerator.

He didn't fall back to give up.

He fell back to ram him.

Norawit jerks violently in his seat when he feels the impact, a sharp hit to the rear of his car.

"Fuck!"

The collision isn't strong enough to break his trajectory. He keeps the wheel steady, and the car continues forward obediently—but the move completely throws him off.

He doesn't understand what just happened.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Norawit shouts, staring into the rearview mirror. "What's wrong with you?!"

No answer.

That alone is terrifying.

Nattawat should be able to hear him perfectly.

Their friends, watching everything unfold, fall silent as well. None of them understand what's happening.

Then the Mustang comes at him again, this time at full speed.

Norawit manages to veer aside just in time, ruining the maneuver. Luckily, he knows Nattawat's aggressive driving style well. He can usually predict his moves.

Not always, but often enough.

Some of Nattawat's tricks are still beyond him, but right now his actions are strangely predictable.

The Mustang lunges again, aiming for the Mazda's side.

Norawit suddenly brakes hard and slips behind him instead.

"Nattawat! Can you hear me?!" he shouts angrily. "What are you doing?! You're going to kill both of us!"

Still no response.

Instead, the Mustang screeches as it spins around in a violent turn, and then charges straight at him.

Through the tinted windshield, Norawit can't see the driver's face.

But in that moment, he's struck with a terrifying certainty.

That isn't Nattawat.

For a split second he even wonders if someone else is behind the wheel.

Nattawat would never put them both in this kind of danger.

He'd ram a train for Norawit if he had to.

And now—

Now he's like a titan trying to destroy the obstacle in his path.

And that obstacle… is Norawit.

"Shit!" he shouts, barely swerving away from a head-on collision.

"What the hell is going on?!" Phuwin yells from his hiding place as he watches the track. "What the hell?! This wasn't part of the plan! Dragon's trying to kill him!"

"I see it," Pahn says anxiously, the rapid clicking of her keyboard filling the background. "Wait… I'm receiving new files. Control instructions… oh shit."

"What?! What does that mean?!" Norawit shouts, fear creeping into his voice as he spins the wheel and overtakes Nattawat again. "What's happening to him?!"

"I think the device in his neck was just activated," she replies.

That single sentence is enough to send Norawit into full panic.

Now he isn't afraid for himself.

He's afraid of what this will do to Nattawat.

His fingers start going numb from the rush of adrenaline.

They used him.

Just like the driver in the last race.

They turned him into a weapon to kill Norawit.

And so far, everyone who tried to do that ended up dying themselves.

"I knew we couldn't trust that bastard!" Phuwin shouts. "I told you! That rich piece of shit would screw us over in the end!"

“He was probably forced,” Pahn says quietly. “They want a show. Most likely Nattawat was ordered to stop you.”

“Or kill me,” Norawit whispers, glancing at the aggressive Mustang chasing him.

“Damian just sent me instructions to fix it,” Pahn says quickly. “Looks like he’s being watched and can’t do it himself.”

“How long do you need?” Norawit asks, swerving across the track as the Mazda’s rear slides wildly.

“Okay… I need to reboot the system, take control, and then reprogram—”

“Pahn, how long?!” he cuts her off, panic rising as he slows down again. “I can’t hold him off for long! He’ll kill me! You can see that!”

“I don’t know. Damn it, just hold on.”

Nattawat slams into the Mazda’s rear bumper again before darting away.

The car’s trajectory collapses instantly.

The Mazda spins violently across the road, control slipping from Norawit’s hands.

He tries to correct it, but it’s going badly.

He can feel the car slipping further and further from his control as panic crashes over him like a wave.

“Baby, he just hit him again—”

“I see it! Give me time,” Pahn snaps.

Norawit forces himself to calm down.

He remembers every theoretical lesson about what to do in a situation like this.

A car skid is always dangerous.

An uncontrollable one is terrifying.

For a moment, his entire body feels like it stops working, like it’s made of cotton.

But if he gives in to panic, a catastrophic crash is inevitable.

The curve, the impact, the speed—it all dragged him into this nightmare.

The rear wheels are reacting faster than the front ones, throwing the car from side to side.

The most important thing right now is to stay calm.

Panic will only make it worse.

Fix it.

These few seconds stretch into eternity as he carefully restores traction.

He lifts his foot from the brake and turns the wheel into the skid.

One wrong move could make everything worse.

He doesn't slam the gas.

He doesn't brake either.

He holds the balance as carefully as possible—

—and it works.

The Mazda shoots off onto the roadside and stops just a few meters from the barrier before the engine stalls.

Norawit sits there for a moment, staring at his trembling hands.

Then he hears the furious roar of the Mustang's engine as Nattawat turns the car around and charges back toward him.

His trick didn't work.

"Shit," Norawit whispers.

He quickly starts the engine again before Nattawat can slam into him.

"God, what is he doing?" Phuwin mutters.

"Norawit, hold on. I'm in the system now."

"Save him," Norawit says immediately. "Turn that thing off. He can't get hurt. I'll buy you time."

He slams the accelerator.

The car surges forward again.

He quickly gains speed but keeps it in the mid-range, hoping that if Nattawat hits him again, the Mazda won't instantly become a twisted piece of scrap metal.

Though he knows that probably won't help.

He won't get this lucky twice.

Fighting someone like Nattawat is nearly impossible.

He’s the best racer in all of Los Angeles.

For every trick Norawit knows, Nattawat has something better.

And right now, with his mind under external control…

It’s like racing against death itself.

Norawit is forced to literally run from him around the entire track while the Mustang relentlessly hunts him down, trying again and again to smash into him.

It’s pure madness.

Jirochtikul seemed to have no idea what he was doing.

He didn’t respond to the pleas for him to stop, he just kept chasing him. The worst part was that he couldn’t hear a thing. In that moment he had only one objective: destroy his opponent.

That was how it worked.

Those damn things really could influence their minds. They shut down all sense of reason completely. Which meant Damian hadn’t been joking or trying to scare them earlier. He truly could change them beyond recognition and make them do absolutely anything, just by pressing a few buttons.

Just like that.

One command, and the person who would never harm you under normal circumstances would suddenly be trying to kill you.

And the most terrifying part was that Nattawat didn’t even realize it.

Titicharoenrak was terrified, though not so much for himself as for him. He understood that if something happened, Nattawat wouldn’t even try to save himself. Right now he wasn’t programmed for that. His only directive was to kill, no matter the cost.

But this wasn’t the moment to give in to stupid panic.

All he had to do was hold out. Just stay alive long enough.

The important thing was to keep Nattawat busy until Pahn could fix this nightmare. She was working on it as fast as she could.

He yanked the handbrake, and the Mazda obediently slid into the turn.

The whole frame rattled and the engine roared like something feral, but the car fought its opponent, and won. Norawit managed to come out of the corner first, straightening the car on the road while leaving Jirochtikul behind in a cloud of white smoke.

Then he accelerated sharply, pulling farther and farther away.

On the straightaway he slammed the gas pedal to the floor, refusing to let Nattawat get close enough to ram him again. His hand hovered near the nitro switch, ready to use it if absolutely necessary. It was dangerous, extremely dangerous, but right now he was willing to risk anything if it meant not getting hit again.

For a few moments he'd been almost certain he wouldn't make it to the finish line with an opponent like this.

To be honest, Nattawat was far stronger and more experienced than he was.

But this wasn't really Nattawat.

This version had no brakes whatsoever and didn't care that he himself might get hurt in the process.

And that was exactly what scared Norawit the most.

For an entire lap he managed to keep him at a safe distance, carefully dodging every attempt to collide. But Nattawat clearly had no intention of giving up.

It seemed he realized that brute force wouldn't get him close enough to his frightened prey, because suddenly he changed tactics.

At one of the upcoming turns, Jirochtikul took a different trajectory and sharply cut across the track.

He was trying to break ahead, to block Norawit's path in the most unexpected way possible.

In just a few seconds he would appear directly in front of him.

Which would mean a horrific, unavoidable crash for both of them.

Norawit understood that perfectly.

He calculated it one step ahead, just like Nattawat himself had once taught him during training.

There was only one way out of this situation.

Use the forbidden trick before his opponent could.

The young man took a deep breath, pushing away the last traces of doubt, then slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

The Mazda shot forward at high speed, suddenly diving into a negative angle under his confident control. The rear axle practically overtook the front, but the car was so maneuverable that pulling off the move turned out to be easier than he'd expected.

He was using Nattawat's own favorite technique against him—the one he usually performed on the Loop.

Almost no one could replicate that maneuver.

But Norawit had always been his most talented student.

Titicharoenrak threw the car into a controlled sideways drift, sliding along the concrete barrier just seconds before impact.

He couldn't execute it as perfectly as Jirochtikul did, but for his level of driving, it was a victory.

Wide black streaks of rubber burned into the asphalt. The air filled with the smell of scorched tires and bitter smoke.

The screech of the wheels sent his blood surging wildly through his veins, his heart pounding so fast it hurt in his chest.

The car "kissed" the wall gently, shaving off a thin layer of white paint onto the rear bumper, then he slammed the gas again and straightened the vehicle back onto the road.

It worked.

The Mustang was left behind in visible confusion, losing him from its sight while barely avoiding crashing into the wall itself. Jirochtikul jerked the steering wheel and skidded to a sideways stop near the barrier.

If he had been watching all this with clear eyes right now, he would probably have been unbelievably proud of Norawit.

And Norawit himself felt an uncontrollable surge of pride, unable to stop the triumphant smile spreading across his face.

"Wow…" he whispered in astonishment, gripping the steering wheel with tense fingers.

For the first time since he'd started driving, he understood what people who were obsessed with racing felt.

There was nothing else like it.

The pure, intoxicating thrill of receiving an insane rush of adrenaline while skillfully maneuvering on the road.

It felt like a pleasant kind of drunkenness. That's what his boyfriend had meant when he talked about it once.

A real race.

The strongest opponent breathing down your neck.

And total uncertainty waiting at the finish line.

That was the moment when a second wind appeared, when you realized you were actually capable of winning.

But for Norawit, this victory meant something deeper.

If he finished this race unharmed, he wouldn't just be defeating the track.

He would be defeating the demons of his past.

"Titicharoenrak, are you still alive?" Lim's voice suddenly crackled in his ear.

"Damian?" Norawit said, surprised. "What are you—"

"You didn't really think it would be a problem for me to tap into another communication channel, did you? As you can probably guess, the fact that I'm talking to you right now means I've got bad news."

A pause.

"Nattawat is under the influence."

"Pahn is already fixing it," Norawit said, taking another turn. "She said you sent her the instructions."

"I did," Lim replied. "But that's not the end of your bad news."

"…Something wrong with the plan?"

"You could say that." Lim's voice was calm, too calm. "I decided to choose a different one."

"A more suitable one."

"And much more effective."

A few minutes earlier…

Damian moved quickly down the empty corridor of their secret office, known as the Powerslide Surveillance Center, hurrying to put the plan into motion. The sharp echo of his leather shoes bounced off the gray walls, matching the restless pounding of his heart.

He could feel a gaze on his back—insistent, burning straight through flesh to bone.

Hwang's security always treated him like a threat whenever the race was involved. Damian knew exactly why. In this place, Hwang felt like the one losing. Everyone could see it: his son was far smarter than he was, and the entire system depended on him.

So of course he'd sent someone to shadow him.

The bastard's fears were obvious. Deep down, Hwang knew things might not go according to his plan. As if anyone had ever truly stood a chance against him before.

But today… someone finally had.

Lim had spent a long time thinking about it all, turning the outcome over and over in his mind, weighing it like scales in his hands. Was it worth it?

In the end, the answer was clear.

It was.

The end justified the means. If Nuthwang had the right to step over the heads of the living to get what he wanted, then why shouldn't someone else do the same?

For once in his life, Damian wanted to fight for something pure, for something right. And he was certain that reaching that goal through less-than-honest means was simply necessary.

There was no other way to win this war.

He glanced at the expensive watch on his wrist to check the time and turned the corner automatically. Behind him, he could hear the guard's footsteps. At the same time, Damian scrolled through his tablet, quietly programming the surveillance cameras.

Hwang could be watching him right now.

Which meant this particular section of the corridor needed to disappear from view, at least for a while.

Because in the next moment, Damian was about to take a decisive step against the greatest fear of his life:

His own father.

The two cameras mounted in the corridor's corners slowly shifted their angles without a sound.

Only then did Damian stop.

The guard approached from behind, frowning in confusion as he looked at the perfectly trimmed back of Damian's head.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Lim?" he asked cautiously. "Are there any difficulties?"

"Yes," Damian replied calmly. "One."

Without warning, he spun and drove his elbow hard into the guard's chest.

The young man doubled over instantly, staggering back in pain. Damian grabbed his shoulder and, with brutal precision, slammed his knee into the guard's face.

There was a sickening crack of bone.

He shoved him away.

The guard collapsed to the floor, unconscious before he even hit it.

Damian grimaced at the sight of blood, quickly assessing the man's condition before letting out a slow breath. With a smooth motion, he adjusted the lapel of his jacket and ran a hand through his hair.

Then he switched the communication channel in his earpiece.

"I'm ready," Damian said quietly. "Are you in position?"

"Yes."

"Come up. It's clear."

He entered the electronic code on the fire door, unlocking it for his partner, and glanced down the corridor.

After that, he dragged the unconscious guard into a utility room further down the hall. Using whatever he could find, he tied the man's hands behind his back and took his radio so he wouldn't be able to report the sabotage.

Locking the door behind him, Damian returned quickly to the meeting spot, glancing over his shoulder several times.

Right on time, a young man stepped into the corridor from the emergency staircase. He wore a black security uniform and a mask covering his face.

It would've been nearly impossible to recognize him without paying attention to the details.

Only two things gave him away to Damian: the shaved eyebrow, and the insolent look in his eyes.

But Hwang would never notice something like that.

He barely considered his guards human.

"Punctual," Lim said with a satisfied smile.

"We agreed everything would be timed to the minute," the man whispered sharply, pulling down his mask as he approached. "We don't have time. Norawit's barely holding on, and Nattawat is ready to kill him. What the hell is going on?"

"I had no choice," Damian said. "I needed to buy time."

"And if he kills him because of that?" Titicharoenrak's voice dropped, dangerous. "I'm only here to save him, understand? If anything happens to him, I'll drag you to hell along with

your father."

"Your blue-haired beauty will fix it," Damian replied coolly. "I don't have time to deal with that. I have to manage the entire system, but until she disables the devices, none of this matters."

"You sure she can handle it?" the young man narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Do you doubt her?" Damian arched a brow.

"No, just…"

"She'll manage," he said firmly.

"And if she doesn't make it in time?"

"She will."

"And if she doesn't?" North pressed.

"Then we wait for her confirmation."

"And if she fails before the system is destroyed?"

"Then they'll die with it," Damian said quietly. "But I won't initiate the process without hearing from her."

Titicharoenrak's brows knit together, tension visible in every line of his face.

If Pahn failed to disable the control devices in time, it would all be over. The plan would collapse, and they'd have to retreat.

But soon Hwang would realize something was wrong.

And when that happened, the shockwave would reach the boys.

There was a very real chance both of them could get caught in it.

North had come here for one reason, to take the only chance he'd ever have to kill two birds with one stone.

To destroy the bastard who had ruined their lives.

And to end this cursed race forever so no one else would die because of it.

If they failed today, there would never be another chance. His brother would never allow him to risk himself like this again.

The only way to remove the control devices from Norawit and Nattawat without consequences was to shut down Powerslide permanently. And to do that, the control blocks had to be destroyed.

That was exactly what they were about to do.

Of course, North understood that if Pahn didn't succeed in time, Damian wouldn't trigger the deactivation. The risk was enormous.

Damian's true goal was to protect Nattawat, from their father and from this race. He wouldn't endanger him more than he already had by activating Blast.

"Phuwin won't expose you too early?" Lim asked suddenly, pulling him from his thoughts. "If they find out too soon, it could ruin everything."

"No," North replied. "I knocked him out."

"Excellent."

"If they knew how hard it would be to kill him, no one would've agreed to this plan."

"You lie well," Damian said with a faint smile. "No one even suspected you."

"Same as you," North shrugged with a smirk. "You told them an entire assassination scheme like the one used to kill John F. Kennedy—something impossible from the start. They wanted it so badly they swallowed the bait."

"In the office there will be plenty of guards—mine and his," Damian explained. "That complicates things, but in that uniform you'll blend in. Stay calm. Act according to the situation. When I need your help, I'll tell you."

"And if they realize I'm not one of them?"

"Try looking at the world more simply," Damian said dryly. "Right now you look like Agent Hitman preparing for a mission. Don't twitch. You'll be fine."

"I'm serious."

"Then threaten him," Damian replied without hesitation. "If you're holding his head in your hands, the guards won't touch you. Their only priority is protecting him."

"…Alright." Titicharoenrak exhaled and nodded. "That I can do. I'm good at tearing bastards' heads off."

"Are you ready to do it?" Damian asked seriously.

"I hope he'll be proud of me when it's over," the young man whispered, staring at the floor. "I don't want that thing hurting him someday if they turn it back on. He deserves a good life more than anyone."

He paused.

"You said if I want to change something, I should start with myself. You were right. Just once in my life, I need to stop being a coward and do something that matters for him."

“Nice speech before dying,” Damian muttered with a smirk, glancing at his watch again as he led him to the correct door.

“So we start Plan B,” North said, looking at him one last time.

“Yes,” Damian replied, already turning away. “We start. Don’t act without instructions. I’ll let you know when everything’s ready. But if something goes wrong… just kill him. And anyone who gets in your way.”

“Hey, Lim.”

Damian stopped and turned.

“You’re not a piece of shit if you’re willing to do this for him,” Titicharoenrak said quietly. “He’s basically nobody to you. But you want to protect him so badly you’re risking everything you have. Isn’t that too high a price?”

“A pure soul is worth ten men like me,” Damian answered.

“That’s… strong.” Titicharoenrak gave a small laugh. “I know you’re not doing it for praise, but still… you’re kind of a cool guy. Even if you’re still a bastard. Figured someone should say it.”

“I expected Nattawat to stop Hwang,” Damian said after a moment. “He’s the only one who isn’t afraid of him. But…”

He shrugged.

“Plans changed. Someone has to end all of this—not just him. If he survives today, there won’t be another chance to kill him. He’ll be on guard against everyone. Including me.”

“And that means he’ll be twice as dangerous.”

Damian’s voice grew quieter.

“No one escapes his wrath if we fail today. And I know exactly what that wrath looks like. I couldn’t protect my mother. I couldn’t protect myself.”

His jaw tightened.

“But at least I can protect that kid… before that bastard breaks him too.”

He paused.

“And your brother comes with him, so I guess I’m fighting for both of them.”

“Thank you,” North said, extending his hand. “You know what for. I’m not good with words. But you’re the one who pushed me to grow a pair for once in my life.”

Damian stared at the offered hand for several seconds before gripping it firmly.

Then, suddenly, he pulled him forward and embraced him.

The hug was brief. Controlled. Almost cold.

But for both of them, it meant more than words.

The only person Damian had ever truly wanted to hug had been dead for a long time.

To Nattawat and Night, he had never meant much. That was why he never forced himself into their lives or tried to build a relationship with them. He knew it was impossible.

No matter how much he changed, it would never be enough.

And a brother like him…was the last thing they needed.

North was one of the few people who had spoken to him recently without fear or open disgust. At first, Lim had only wanted to be friendly with him, drawn by curiosity. Later, there had been fear, because of the threats. But now… now there was something like respect between them. Understanding.

Despite the tension hanging in the air between them, born from too many problems and too many things left unsaid, Lim simply wanted to feel human warmth one last time.

That was why he did it without asking permission.

He knew North needed it too.

“You’re a good partner, North Titicharoenrak,” Lim said quietly, giving his shoulder a gentle pat. “It’ll hurt him. But he has something that will save him, so don’t worry. He’ll make it through. No matter how hard it gets, time and love always heal.”

He paused.

“That’s why they both have to survive.”

“Yeah,” North murmured. “Otherwise all of this is meaningless. If one of them dies… then everything ends.”

“Exactly.”

North exhaled deeply.

“Do you think dying is scary?”

Lim let out a bitter chuckle.

“It’s far more frightening to die on the inside, my friend. The body dies quickly. But what’s inside…” He shook his head. “In our case, that part was inevitable.”

He looked at North for a moment.

“We’ve been strong for far too long. Both of us are broken. Maybe it’s time we finally do something good for once. Seems like a perfect opportunity to be useful to our brothers.”

“You’re right,” the younger man said thoughtfully.

“Don’t regret this choice. When he hears everything, he’ll understand you.” Lim’s voice softened. “For people like us, death is simply a logical ending. You’re moving toward it whether you like it or not. And I…” He shrugged lightly. “I need it.”

“I didn’t grow up to be the person I was supposed to become. I’ve done things I never wanted to do. I’m not a good person, but becoming a bad one wasn’t my choice either.”

He smirked faintly.

“I know I’m a real bastard. And according to the rules of the genre, bastards like me are supposed to die. It’ll make things easier for everyone. The world might even become a little better.”

He took a slow step backward.

“So at least let my death serve a good purpose. Maybe someday someone will remember something about me that isn’t terrible.”

North’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“This isn’t suicide… right? He won’t blame me for it? He won’t think I abandoned him?” His throat tightened. “I just want to help him. Protect him.”

“It’s a sacrifice,” Damian said quietly, stepping back into the corridor.

He studied North for a moment.

“I wasn’t wrong about you.”

A faint smile tugged at his lips.

“You know, the people least afraid of death are the ones whose lives hold the greatest value.”

He winked.

“Remember that. And smile when you win.”

Then he disappeared around the corner.

According to their secret plan, Titicharoenrak would enter the office where Hwang was, blend in with the guards, and wait for the right moment—or a signal from Lim. Meanwhile, his partner would work on disabling the Powerslide system.

And it was time to begin.

There was almost no time left.

North adjusted the mask over his face and slipped silently into the dark room. The only light came from dozens of screens covering one wall, standing before them was the bastard himself.

Norawit had been right.

The moment North saw him, something inside him exploded.

A violent urge surged through him—to blow the man's head apart with a single precise shot. But only an idiot would do something like that in front of ten armed guards.

So he stepped aside instead, moving closer to the wall on the man's left.

He forced himself to calm the storm raging inside him, hiding his trembling hands behind his back.

His eyes flicked cautiously around the room.

No one paid him any attention.

There were already ten guards here. One more or less made no difference.

For him, that was the perfect advantage.

He was in position.

All that remained was to keep himself under control until the right moment—and wait for this entire nightmare to end so he could save his older brother.

Strangely enough, he wasn't afraid.

His heart wasn't pounding wildly in his chest. His palms weren't sweating.

For the first time in a long while, he was absolutely certain of what he was doing.

This was his decision.

No one was forcing him.

His heart and soul had chosen this path knowingly.

If death was waiting for him sooner or later anyway… then at least it wouldn't be meaningless.

He would fulfill his greatest wish.

And he hoped that, in the end, Norawit would be proud of him.

Meanwhile, Damian had already entered the technical room, the most critical node in the entire Powerslide system.

The main control console was here.

And it had to be destroyed first.

Everything began here.

And everything would end here.

The device itself was a massive table covered in dozens of levers and buttons. Nearby stood several power panels humming with high voltage, feeding electricity into the system. Above them, mounted on the wall, was a large monitor displaying the current status of every system component—along with the race itself.

Soft dark-blue light from the screen illuminated the room.

But Lim navigated the space easily.

After all, he had designed it.

He had built it.

In many ways, this building was his second home.

Quietly closing the door behind him, he pulled several wires and a flash drive from the inside pocket of his black jacket.

Damian sat at the main computer and inserted the drive.

A few quick manipulations—simple for him—connected him to the "Cast's little brother" program he had installed there. A perfect miniature copy he had created specifically for today's operation.

Powerful. Fast. Easily deployable from external storage.

Exactly what he needed.

"Hello, my little joy," he whispered with a smile as his fingers flew across the keyboard.

The large screen shifted to dark green.

Mechanical gears spun across the display.

Success.

The AI boot screen appeared, and pride surged inside his chest.

While waiting for the full activation, Damian quickly connected several blue wires to the power block beside the console, which hummed under heavy electrical load. He paused for a moment, listening carefully to the corridor outside.

Quiet.

For now.

But someone could walk in at any moment.

He had catastrophically little time to complete a task of this scale.

Right now, Norawit and Nattawat were fighting each other. Night was approaching with the truth. And Hwang would soon start looking for him, and understand everything.

He'd already been gone too long.

He needed to move faster.

"Good evening, sir," the assistant finally said.

"You're quick today, my friend," Lim replied with a small grin. "Even faster than I expected."

"The updated firmware has improved my efficiency. Thank you for that. What task would you like me to perform today?"

"Carry out one final order for me."

"Of course, sir."

"Access the Powerslide control system and begin the shutdown sequence. I'm already entering the ciphers into the code."

"Beginning the operation, sir."

A gray loading bar appeared in the corner of the screen.

The irreversible process had begun.

Damian rapidly typed strings of symbols and numbers, watching the percentage tick upward.

His gaze darted from the main screen to the tablet, to the wall monitor, and back again while his fingers hammered across the keyboard.

He worked unbelievably fast, even shocking himself with his own productivity.

At the same time he entered encrypted codes he had written himself, seized control of the system, and launched the destruction process.

Fortunately, he knew how to work at this speed.

With the kind of supervision he'd lived under his entire life, he had learned to do far more difficult things.

The only thing that mattered now was not making a mistake.

One error—and everything would collapse.

After a moment, he grabbed the tablet and hacked into the “Avengers squad” communication channel, temporarily muting everyone except Norawit.

The screen above showed the race track.

Things looked terrible.

Norawit was desperately trying to escape Nattawat, maneuvering with insane speed and precision—and not always successfully.

But his last maneuver was breathtakingly clean.

And Hwang definitely wouldn’t like that.

“Titicharoenrak, you still alive?”

“Damian?” Norawit sounded shocked. “What are you—”

“You didn’t really think connecting to another comm channel would be difficult for me, did you?” Lim said calmly. “And as you’ve probably guessed, if I’m talking to you now, the news isn’t good. Nattawat is under the influence.”

“Pahn is already fixing it. She said you sent her instructions,” Norawit replied as he slid through another turn.

“Yes. But unfortunately that’s not the end of your bad news.”

“…Problems with the plan?”

“You could say that.” Lim sighed lightly. “I decided to choose another one. A more effective option.”

“What the hell?!” Titicharoenrak snapped.

“I know, I know. You’re disappointed. But listen carefully, I don’t have much time.”

“You lied to us?! Phu was right, damn it, you—”

“Right now I’m saving both you and your boyfriend’s lives, so shut up.”

“…What does that even mean?”

“You’re right. I did lie to you,” Lim said calmly. “I gave you a plan that was impossible to execute. Neither you, nor me, nor Phuwin could just walk in here and shoot Hwang.”

“The moment anyone points a gun at him…”

“…they get killed,” Norawit finished quietly.

“Exactly.”

“But I needed all of you here at the same time.”

“You were the distraction for Nuthwang. Right now he’s completely absorbed in watching Nattawat try to kill you.”

“And that,” Lim said softly, “is what gave me the time I needed to start this.”

“That’s why you activated the device?” Norawit asked suddenly.

“Yes. I had no choice. Otherwise none of the plans would’ve worked.”

“Wait—you said start? Start what?” Titicharoenrak asked, swallowing nervously.

“Nuclear missiles,” Lim said dryly, rolling his eyes. “Don’t be stupid. I’m starting the destruction of the control blocks.”

“…What? You?! I don’t understand.”

Just then Damian heard hurried footsteps in the corridor.

He jumped to his feet and pressed himself against the wall near the entrance, waiting.

Someone was coming to check on him.

Damn.

Hwang had finally started wondering why he’d been gone so long.

And the spectacular move Titicharoenrak had just pulled off on the track had probably made him furious.

The door to the technical room swings open abruptly, and a guard in a classic suit slips inside. One of Hwang’s men.

Lim exhales quietly. He’d been right. There’s no avoiding drastic action.

He notices the man lifting his radio, about to answer someone on the other end, and quickly steps up behind him. Unfortunately, Damian knows exactly how to break a human body in a single second.

The guard doesn’t even get the chance to speak.

With a sharp, forceful motion, Damian wrenches the man’s neck to the side. A loud crack echoes through the room. The violent twist bends the spine at an unnatural angle, something the human body simply has no defense against. The damage to the upper spinal cord is fatal.

Death is instantaneous.

Damian catches the body before it can collapse to the floor and make noise. He drags it aside and quietly shuts the door again.

Damn it. There's no time left.

He throws an anxious glance at the screen and sees the launch countdown: only a few minutes remain.

"What the hell is going on?! Do you hear me?! Can anyone hear me at all?! Pahn?!" Titicharoenrak's frightened voice shouts through the earpiece.

"I hear you. Calm down. I had to remove an obstacle. There's no time left. Listen to me very carefully now," Lim says, sitting back down at the desk.

"But you said it was impossible to destroy," Norawit replies, panic creeping into his voice.

"I said it was theoretically possible. In practice, it's… complicated. It requires two people. Once the first destruction sequence is activated, the second one has to be triggered immediately."

"And you're going to do that?" he asks, stunned.

"Do you have any other ideas for stopping Powerslide? Come on, Titicharoenrak. I'm all ears."

"I just—"

"Listen to me, idiot. I'm about to do the only decent thing I've done in my entire life, and I don't want to die for nothing. So just help me. Don't you dare stop now. Do you understand? No matter what happens. It's not just your life at stake. Pretend you're still racing. Pretend you're fighting for the win. Don't stop until everything is over."

"How will I know when it's over?" Norawit asks, shifting gears.

"You'll know. Trust me."

"What happens when you destroy the system?"

"An explosion," Damian says shortly as he enters the final cipher. "After that, you can hit the brakes. It'll all be over."

"Wait… but you're inside the building," Titicharoenrak says slowly, frowning.

"That's right," Damian answers with a dry, ironic chuckle.

"You're…?"

"Yes."

"What the hell?! What are you doing?! Wait, there has to be—"

“I know exactly what I’m doing. This is a deliberate decision. There’s no other way to destroy Powerslide, you know that. Disabling Blast and killing Hwang isn’t enough. Who knows who might try to use all this again someday. These devices could be activated years from now, which means they have to be removed. That can only be done after the explosion. Otherwise you’ll all die along with the system. It’s the self-defense protocol I designed myself. Everything will be destroyed.”

“Why are you doing this? You’re going to die. I thought you were the last person who cared about anyone else.”

“I’m giving my life for a good cause. Dying in a fight is a worthy ending. Don’t you think?” Damian smirks as he watches the live broadcast of the race. “I spent my entire life afraid to fight. But right before the end… I decided to join the war. For some people, death is suffering. For me, it’s freedom. I know you have a lot of questions about me. I do too. But I don’t have answers. I’m just a bad person, and bad people don’t get happy endings.”

He pauses, eyes still on the screen.

“You probably didn’t think about it, but once my father’s activities become public, I’ll be hit just as hard. I’ll be finished right along with him. My company will collapse. Everything I’ve spent years building will be destroyed in minutes. And me? I’ll be dragged through the mud and thrown in prison for every sin, mine and everyone else’s. So I’m choosing a different path.”

He chuckles softly.

“And by the way… I should thank you for that.”

“Me?” Norawit asks, surprised.

“You showed me that having feelings doesn’t make someone weak,” Damian says, nodding slightly to himself. “Funny. I always saw potential in you. But you made me think about a lot of things. What was it you said? That feelings are what make us human? You were right, Titicharoenrak. I felt human again when I finally allowed myself to feel them.”

He glances back at the race footage.

“You have no idea how grateful I am. I’d almost forgotten how good that feeling is.”

Suddenly, Damian notices something on the screen.

The Mustang chasing Norawit’s car abruptly stops closing the distance. It slows down sharply and finally drops back from his rear bumper.

There’s only one explanation.

It worked.

The little hacker girl handled her part perfectly.

Hwang no longer has any control over them. Every system is now in Pahn's hands.

"Cast, show me the CNN live broadcast," Lim says while checking the launch readiness.

"Executing command, sir."

"What's going on?" Norawit asks cautiously, glancing at the car behind him.

"Night did it," Damian replies while listening to the news, a victorious grin spreading across his face.

"And Nattawat seems to be backing off," Titicharoenrak says, exhaling in relief as tension finally loosens in his chest.

"Yes. Pahn did everything right," Damian says, reconnecting the others to the shared channel. "Time to say goodbye, Avengers."

"Is anyone there?!" the girl's panicked voice immediately bursts through the line. "What's happening over there?! I can't reach anyone! Nattawat, do you hear me?! Norawit?! Phu?!"

"Yeah… I think I'm okay," Nattawat answers, blinking in confusion as he regains his bearings.

"Thank God! I was losing my mind!"

"What did I do?"

"No time to explain. The important thing is you're back with us. Norawit, how are you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm holding on," he says with a small nod. "Welcome back, kid."

"Did I screw something up?" Nattawat asks.

"No. You bought me plenty of time," Damian says.

"Night just made everything happen. The news channels are already talking about the judge," Pahn says with a satisfied smile. "Guys… we did it. Now we just need to complete the second part of the plan."

"Phuwin, are you ready?" Titicharoenrak asks.

"There have been some changes to the plan," Lim says suddenly, his words falling like a bolt of thunder. "He's safe, but he won't answer you right now."

"You?! Hey, what did you do to him?!" the girl snaps.

"Not me. North. We needed to take him out of action for a little while. He's safe. He'll wake up soon."

"What does my brother have to do with—" Norawit stops mid-sentence.

And suddenly understands everything.

“No.”

The realization slams into him like a hammer. A painful ringing fills his ears.

Inside the building, together with Damian… is his younger brother.

And that means only one thing.

He’s the second person. The one who will activate the destruction of the second block.

Which means—

He’s going to die.

“I’m sorry, Norawit,” Lim says quietly.

“No! Stop him right now!” Titicharoenrak screams desperately, his hands shaking on the wheel as panic floods his body.

“It’s his choice. He made the decision himself. He wants to protect you. You understood correctly. He’s the second one.”

“No! No! No!” Norawit shouts, slamming on the brakes before forcing himself forward again. “He can’t! Stop him! Right now!”

“Don’t you dare finish the race early! They’ll put a bullet in both of your heads!” Lim shouts.

“My brother is in danger! Go to hell!” Norawit yells back, though he keeps driving.

Hopelessness crashes over him so violently that his hands tremble. Panic blurs his vision with a white haze, and he can barely see the road anymore.

All he can think about is saving North.

But the building where his brother is… he’s already passed it twice during the race.

When it starts, everything will explode.

There will be no chance of survival.

“Nattawat could get hurt because of your emotions! Think, Norawit! Your brother is doing this for you. You’ll understand once you listen to the message he left for you. Open it after everything is over,” Lim says, knowing exactly what he must be feeling.

“Can he hear me right now?! Tell me, can he hear me?! I need to talk to him!”

“No. He knew you’d try to stop him. He asked to be disconnected.”

“Then reconnect him! Where is he right now?! Protect him! Please, I’m begging you! Do everything you can! Damian, please!” Titicharoenrak cries out, his voice breaking with such pain that for a moment even Lim’s heart tears apart.

He feels sorry for him.

Because he knows that feeling of helplessness all too well.

When you desperately want to change something… but you simply can’t.

It hurts.

That’s how he’s lived almost his entire life.

Maybe Norawit will hate him forever after this. But right now, Damian chooses the outcome that will save the most people.

Two lives in exchange for everyone else’s freedom.

Not such a high price.

“He’s with Hwang. He’ll kill him and destroy Powerslide. I’m sorry, but I won’t stop him. This was our decision. He wants to protect his brother, and I want to protect mine. If we don’t end it now, everything could happen again,” Damian says, staring at the computer screen where everything is ready for the final command.

“It’s time.”

“Will someone explain what the hell is going on?!” Nattawat shouts in fear, completely lost.

“Nattawat…” Lim begins quietly, then stops, rubbing his tired eyes. “I’m sorry you were unlucky enough to be born into that family. Nothing I say now will justify anything I’ve done… and honestly, it doesn’t matter anymore. Just know that I’m glad we met.”

“Wait… are you saying goodbye to me?” Nattawat asks, eyes wide with fear as he stares at the road. “What are you planning?”

“Yes. I’m leaving you and Norawit alone, just like I promised. Giving you what all of you wanted so badly,” he says with a crooked smile.

“God damn it, what is happening?! What are you doing?! Are you—”

“Esther would be proud of you. Remember that. You’re a good person. Don’t lose that, and don’t let anyone take it away from you. Goodbye, Nattawat.”

“Damian, wait! No—hold on! You—”

“Avengers, you did good work,” Lim says with a faint smile. “I admire how loyal you are to each other. Try not to get yourselves into trouble like this again.”

Then the connection cuts off.

Damian takes a deep breath.

He enters the final code into the panel built into the desk and places his palm on the scanner. The system reads his fingerprints to confirm the last command.

The area around his hand lights up green.

A message appears on the screen:

Do you really want to initiate the deactivation process?

He hesitates for only a single moment, then casts a quick glance at the black Mustang racing across the track on the screen. The car tears down the asphalt, and with that sight, his resolve settles into place. Damian presses “Yes.”

At that very second, sirens erupt throughout the entire building and the lights begin flashing violently.

He connects to the communication channel with North and exhales heavily, watching the race on the monitor in front of him. It is still going. Still racing toward the end.

And for the first time in a long while, he feels happy.

Because he is finally finishing something important in his life. Finally correcting the very mistake he himself created.

Powerslide was built by Nuthwang, but the entire system—from its first concept to the final line of code—had been designed by Damian under his strict supervision. Only he knows how it can truly be destroyed. The entire operational algorithm was built to make that nearly impossible.

But nothing in this world lasts forever.

Lim hears the sound of hurried footsteps rushing down the corridor toward the door of the technical control room. A wide smile spreads across his face, dimples appearing in his cheeks. He raises his hands in the air as if preparing for his own arrest and watches the countdown begin, feeling like an undisputed victor.

Because he knows exactly how this will end.

The others just don’t know it yet.

Hwang’s security bursts into the room, kicking the door open without hesitation. A second later Damian feels the cold barrel of a gun pressed against the back of his head.

“Don’t make any sudden moves, Mr. Lim,” someone says.

“Oh, don’t worry, guys,” Damian chuckles quietly. “I’ve already done everything.”

He tilts his head slightly.

“North, can you hear me?”

Meanwhile, in the office where the younger Titicharoenrak had been waiting for the signal, chaos had already broken out.

The judge’s guards had fled the moment the sirens began to scream. Only Damian’s men remained, following their employer’s orders not to react to the alarm unless they needed to assist the sabotage.

Nut Jirochtikul was furious, absolutely feral with rage. He was smashing everything in his path, shouting at everyone around him because nothing was going according to plan.

Norawit had survived again.

The race was ending with his obvious victory. Less than a single lap remained.

And the judge’s phone would not stop ringing, his lawyer calling again and again to tell him what was already spreading through the news.

In his blind fury, he didn’t even notice that most of his security was gone. Only a handful remained beside him. The others stood off to the side, waiting.

Watching.

Preparing.

“I hear you,” North says quietly, slowly pulling a pistol from his jacket.

“Then move, kid,” Damian replies. “Destroy him.”

North immediately strides toward Hwang and grabs him from behind. His arm locks around the man’s neck, pulling him closer while the barrel of the gun presses against his temple.

The judge struggles for only a few seconds.

But the moment he feels the cold metal against his skin, he goes completely still.

What a coward.

Several guards in expensive suits instantly aim their weapons at them, but Lim’s men react faster. Gunshots echo through the room. The judge’s security is eliminated in seconds.

Now no one is left to protect him.

“Go,” North tells them quickly, giving a grateful nod. “You don’t have much time.”

They leave without hesitation.

“What are you doing?!” Hwang shouts. “Who the hell are you?!”

“Shut your mouth, you pig!” North snaps, tightening his grip around the man’s throat.

“What do you want?” Hwang gasps, clutching at his arm.

“You want to know who I am?” the young man says with a crooked smile.

“North Titicharoenrak. The brother of the man you’re so desperate to kill.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to settle the debt.”

He shoves the judge toward the desk, keeping the gun trained on him as he backs toward the secondary control console.

His eyes never leave the man’s face.

Slowly, deliberately, he removes the mask covering his own.

He wants this bastard to see the face of the person who will end him.

For a split second, realization flashes through the judge’s eyes. He lifts his hands, as if hoping to stop him.

North simply shakes his head, a cruel smile curling on his lips.

He places his palm on the scanner and enters the code Damian had given him. Their actions synchronize.

That’s it.

Ten seconds remain before everything ends forever.

And strangely enough, North isn’t afraid to die.

What he feels instead is a wild, intoxicating sense of superiority over his enemy. His soul feels lighter, almost jubilant. The rage that had lived inside him for years finally finds its target.

“Attention. Please evacuate immediately. Deactivation system initiated.”

The robotic voice echoes through the building.

“No!” Hwang shouts, stepping toward him.

North shoots without hesitation.

“Nine,” the system counts.

The bullet tears through the man’s shoulder. He grabs the wound, screaming in pain, while North watches with a savage smile.

He enters another command, locking the doors.

The judge realizes too late what that means. The automatic shutters begin to close. In desperation, he lunges toward the exit.

North shoots again.

The bullet shatters his leg.

"Eight."

Nut collapses to the floor, whimpering in agony.

The doors slam shut.

Now they are alone.

North advances slowly, like an enraged predator, the gun steady in his hand. The judge scrambles backward across the floor toward the wall.

"Seven."

"Please… don't…"

"Don't?" North laughs mockingly. "You're begging for mercy, you piece of shit?"

"Yes… please…"

"God, you're pathetic without your loyal dogs."

"Six."

"Have mercy—"

"Did you show mercy to my mother? To my father? To my friend?" North's voice turns icy. "You don't even deserve to ask."

"We have to leave!" Hwang shouts desperately. "Do you understand? This place—"

"Five."

"It's over, bastard," North says quietly. "I'm not letting you escape. You're dying here. Right now. With me."

"This whole place is about to explode!" Hwang screams in panic. "What have you done?! We —we're all—"

"Four."

"Doesn't feel good, does it?" North sneers. "Remember this feeling. The moment someone finally outplays you. Be afraid of death. I want to see you shaking before you die, you piece

of filth."

He kicks him hard in the face.

"Three."

"I've waited for this moment for so long," he murmurs. "This is for Abigail. For Esther. For my parents. And for Pond."

Each name is spoken like a verdict.

He fires again and again, deliberately choosing places that won't kill instantly, only make the man scream louder.

"Two."

"I came here to win," North says, staring straight into his eyes.

"No…" Nuthwang rasps, still dragging himself toward the wall.

"One."

"We won, Norr," North says softly, letting the gun fall from his hand.

"Process irreversible. Launch."

A peaceful smile appears on his face.

In his final moment, he thinks only of his older brother.

Then the explosion comes.

A massive blast wave tears through the building, shattering everything in its path. The entire structure collapses like a house of cards as flames swallow it in an instant.

Every broadcast transmission cuts off immediately.

But Norawit sees it with his own eyes, the Powerslide observation center erupting into the air, and hears the deafening roar of the explosion.

He slams on the brakes, squinting against the blaze. Chunks of concrete, shattered glass, and twisted debris burst outward in every direction a few hundred meters from the highway they're racing along. Some of it rains down onto the asphalt itself, the building stands too close to the road for anything else to happen. The blast is so powerful that even the guardrail near the center of the track splits and cracks along almost its entire length.

The thunder of the explosion doesn't just tear apart brick and steel. Something inside Norawit collapses with it.

He breaks from the inside just as easily as those walls did, because he knows, he knows, that at the very heart of that monstrous cloud of fire and choking smoke is North.

A few seconds later, he crosses the finish line. As always, smoke flares erupt in celebration of the winner.

He barely manages to stop the car. The rear of the Mazda fishtails violently from side to side, tires screaming as they carve black scars into the asphalt. He moves on pure instinct, his body running on autopilot while his mind sinks into shock and denial. His consciousness refuses to accept what has just happened.

It refuses to believe that he has just lost his little brother.

The pain is so immense that it freezes him in place.

His eyes stare blankly at the ruined building still burning nearby, flames licking the sky like a massive torch. He should be celebrating. He should be relieved that he survived, that he won. That Hwang is finally dead.

But all he can feel is the terrible truth: he lost far more than he gained.

No revenge in the world was worth this.

But damn it—he had drowned so deeply in that revenge that he forgot what he still had left to lose. The only family he had left.

He had lived in the past, intoxicated by his own pain, forgetting that his life had continued moving forward. Forgetting that he still had someone beside him.

Now he is alone.

His whole family is gone, and there is no one left to blame. Somehow that makes it even worse. Pain is easier to survive when you know who caused it.

But this pain has no culprit.

It is simply loss.

His soul tears apart in that moment just as swiftly and easily as the explosion destroyed the massive brick building. Norawit feels himself growing distant from everything around him. The loneliness is so unbearable it feels as though his heart has been ripped from his chest.

Some part of him is still burning inside that ruined building.

Why is he here?

Why is he breathing?

Why is he still alive?

What did he do to deserve this unbearable ounce of pain in his life?

Slowly, he climbs out of the car, his legs numb and unsteady, like they're made of cotton. He can't feel the pulse of life inside himself anymore. After only two steps, his strength gives out and he collapses onto the asphalt.

He shatters.

With a loud crack and unbearable pain.

Every bone seems to splinter beneath the crushing weight of the apocalypse raging inside him, forcing him down onto his knees. He wants to rip open his chest with his own hands, because somewhere beneath his ribs, buried under layers of flesh, his heart is dying.

It feels like a desperate necessity to cradle it gently in his hands and protect it until the pain passes.

But that's impossible.

Everything inside him turns to stone, numb and unfeeling, as though his emotions are abandoning him forever.

His lungs fill with the acrid smoke of the burning wreckage, but what truly suffocates him is the realization that he couldn't save the most important person in his life.

A scream tears from his chest—raw, desperate, the kind of cry only a wounded soul can make. It's so loud, so broken, that his voice begins to rasp, yet he screams again, ripping his vocal cords apart.

The sound feels powerful enough to shatter the world.

As if the sky might crack open above him. As if the sun might freeze in place. As if a typhoon might descend or the earth itself might split apart.

There is nothing more terrifying in this world than the sound of that grief.

For the first time in his life, he cries without shame.

He had always held it in, afraid to show weakness to anyone. But now everything spills out of him—through tears and screams—because the pain is tearing him to pieces.

So this is the "ten" he had always feared reaching.

The unbearable breaking point.

And now he knows who it was meant for all along.

North was never just his younger brother. He was a piece of Norawit's soul.

And now he's gone forever.

For ten years, Norawit chased a single desire: revenge. And yes, he got what he wanted.

Hwang is dead.

The race is finally over.

But the price he paid for it is beyond imagination.

Nattawat slowly approaches him from behind, pressing both hands over his mouth as he struggles to hold back tears. He doesn't fully understand what happened inside that building. But one thing is painfully clear.

They lost North forever.

And the man he loves is falling apart right before his eyes, and he can't do anything to stop it.

Norawit screams so fiercely that every sound feels like an electric shock tearing straight through the body. No one could watch those tears of loss without feeling their heart tremble —even the cruelest creature in the world would feel something break inside.

When Nattawat finally wraps his arms around him and feels Norawit trembling violently, choking on his grief, something inside him breaks too.

He can't hold it in.

Tears stream down Nattawat's face, and he doesn't even try to hide them. He lost someone precious too.

In that moment, he would give Norawit everything in the world if it could ease his pain for even a second.

But nothing can fix this.

Nothing can soften the devastation.

It wasn't only North who died in that explosion.

A piece of his brother died with him.

And Nattawat has no idea how he'll ever pull Norawit out of this darkness.

It feels impossible.

But he knows one thing with absolute certainty: he will never leave him.

If he has to, he will sit beside him every second for the rest of their lives. No matter what happens, he won't let him face this alone.

Because now, they only have each other.

Norawit sobs against his shoulder, completely broken. He chokes on his tears and screams until his voice grows hoarse, until the cries turn into the whimpering of a wounded animal.

And Nattawat cries with him.

He can feel every ounce of Norawit's pain as if it were his own. It seeps beneath his skin and tears at his heart. He holds him tightly, stroking his hair, saying nothing.

There are no words in the world that could express what Norawit is feeling.

And there are no words that could comfort him now.

All he needs is permission to be weak.

That is the only thing that matters.

Fate has struck him down again, and honestly—it feels like a blow he might not survive.

Norawit clutches him like a lifeline. Suddenly, he falls quiet.

He presses his face into Nattawat's shoulder and stares with glassy eyes, full of bitter tears, at the burning ruins of the building.

Perhaps that's exactly what his soul looks like now.

Ruins.

How much pain can a human being endure?

It's a question he has asked himself many times. Every time he thought he had reached his limit, another wave of suffering came—and somehow he endured it.

Through blood, sweat, and tears, he always stood back up and kept moving forward.

So maybe the answer is simple.

A person can endure exactly as much pain as fate decides to give them.

As long as the human heart—vast, deep, boundless, and noble—is capable of holding it, we will keep searching for the limit and enduring anyway.

But there is one problem.

Eventually, emotional numbness sets in.

And that is exactly what Norawit feels now.

He has screamed everything out of himself. Now there is nothing left.

No tears.

No pain.

Just a monstrous emptiness.

He presses himself against the body of the person he loves and realizes he has nothing left.

He lost everything.

His mother.

His father.

His younger brother.

What reason is there to keep living?

For what?

For whom?

But the answer is painfully clear.

If he allows himself to be devoured by weakness now, then North's death—and Damian's too—will have been meaningless. And he cannot allow that.

They fought for them. For their freedom.

He has no idea how he will continue living.

But he knows that he must.

Even though the most important piece of his soul exploded into ashes along with the Powerslide system.

Deep down, he knows he has burned to ashes himself.

What remains of him—perhaps for years, perhaps for the rest of his life—is only a shell of a man living on autopilot.

He doesn't know if he will ever truly come back to life.

But there is still someone who gives his existence meaning.

And that realization is the only thing keeping him standing.

After their parents died, his brother became the center of Norawit's world. He poured into North all the love that should have been shared between their entire family.

But then revenge consumed him.

Now there is no one left to take revenge on.

He must find peace.

He must transform that pain back into love—just as he managed to do once, many years ago.

Nattawat will have to accept him like this.

But right now, Norawit isn't even capable of that.

The moment North left this world, the light vanished from Norawit's eyes.

He feels as if he's covered in the ashes of his burned-out soul. Almost physically, he can sense that something inside him died along with his brother.

Something vital.

Everything now has a different meaning.

All his life, he knew that somewhere beside him existed the other half that made him whole.

Now that half is gone forever.

Perhaps this is what it feels like when the soul dies.

How long will this moment of death-pain last?

They say it takes half as long as the time it took to destroy the soul.

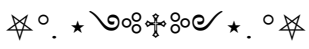
Which means it may last for years.

Will he ever come back to life after this?

No one can say.

Will he ever be the same again?

Definitely not.



Nattawat brought Norawit back to his apartment after everything that had happened.

The entire drive, Norawit didn't say a single word. But Nattawat didn't push him with questions either. In fact, he didn't ask him anything at all, nor did he try to start a conversation. He simply held Norawit's hand, offering quiet, wordless support.

You didn’t need to be a genius to understand that a long and painfully difficult road lay ahead. The only things that could possibly help now were time and the care of those who loved him. Grief like this couldn’t be survived any other way.

Everything had changed.

The life of this man, already battered by fate, had split into two vast and separate chapters. In the first, he had been a caring older brother, a father, even a mother to North. He had lived entirely for him, rarely sparing a thought for himself. In the second, he was simply Norawit Titicharoenrak, a man who no longer understood how to exist alone in this world.

Right now, he had returned to the role of that eleven-year-old boy he had once buried deep inside himself for years. Broken. Helpless. Just as he had been after the tragedy with North.

And now it was his friends who would have to take care of him the way he had once taken care of everyone else. If they didn’t, he would never find his way out of this darkness.

It was still so hard to believe.

It was almost impossible to accept that someone so important to all of them was no longer alive. They hadn’t even fully survived the pain of losing Pond when another cruel blow struck them. But this time it felt different.

Last time, they had been overflowing with anger. It had been so intense that they had nearly turned on each other because of it.

Now there was only grief.

Quiet grief. Silent, heavy, and somehow even more tragic.

Everyone had come to support Norawit. No one wanted to leave each other alone tonight. Pahn, Phuwin, Satang, and Night had rushed over the moment everything was over. They were united by the same pain now, and the only way to survive it was together.

No one said anything. Words would have been pointless.

Instead, they pulled Norawit into a tight circle of embraces so he wouldn’t feel alone in a world without his brother. The moment he felt that warm ring of familiar arms around him, he broke down again.

They cried with him for a long time, mourning the loss and trying to understand how life could possibly continue after this.

Several hours later, Norawit finally fell asleep, though only with great difficulty, after a heavy dose of sedatives that Satang had practically forced him to drink. Everyone understood it was necessary. Otherwise he might have lost control of his emotions or done something reckless.

They were all worried about his state.

It felt like even breathing too loudly might shatter the fragile peace he had finally found.

They sat in absolute silence, listening to the quiet sound of his breathing while Nattawat watched him carefully, gently stroking his hair as if he were a small child.

Eventually, Phuwin and Pahn fell asleep together on the couch. Satang dozed off on the floor beside the bed. None of them wanted to leave. They had stayed in case Norawit needed anything. Besides, no one had the desire to be alone right now.

The only two people still awake were Nattawat and Night.

The younger Jirochtikul sat in an armchair, staring absentmindedly at his brother's guitar. It took tremendous effort for him to keep the storm of emotions inside from spilling out. He had always been someone who kept his feelings tightly controlled, but now that control was hanging by a thread.

It hurt.

There was no point pretending this loss hadn't carved another deep wound into him. It hurt even more than he had expected.

What crushed him most was the fact that they hadn't even said goodbye. They hadn't been strangers to each other, after all. And yet Night had no idea that yesterday would be the last day he would ever spend beside the person he loved so desperately.

North had hidden it well. The fact that he had completely different plans for today, plans he had arranged with Damian.

He had known he was leaving for good.

Maybe that was why he hadn't let go of Night's hand the entire evening and night. It had felt strange how gentle he'd been, unusually soft. Night had noticed it, but hadn't thought much of it at the time.

After all, even though they had broken up, their feelings for each other had never truly disappeared.

Losing him was unbearable.

Letting go of someone you love always hurts. No one can ever be prepared for it. And when something like this happens suddenly, your mind simply refuses to fully accept it.

But deep down, Night understood something.

Sooner or later, it had been inevitable.

No matter how desperately he had tried to save North, he had never been the one capable of doing it. Only North himself could have saved himself. And at some point, his strength had cracked beyond repair.

He knew he had lost control of everything. He had crossed every possible line and could no longer live a normal life. After the overdose, there had been no way back for him.

Everyone had understood it somewhere deep inside.

Everyone except Norawit.

Norawit had still believed things could get better.

North himself had once said that something inside him had reset after that accident. No one knew what he had been thinking about during those last few days, but he claimed his eyes had been opened to many things.

No one had imagined it would end like this.

It had been an incredibly brave act. But accepting that truth was unbearably difficult.

In that explosion, Night had lost his father, a brother who had been emotionally distant yet bound to him by blood, and the person his heart had loved most.

Their relationship had been complicated, but Titicharoenrak had given him countless happy moments he would carry forever. Accepting that he would never see him again was almost impossible.

Everyone in the room shared the same strange feeling: that this reckless idiot with the charming smile, always getting himself into trouble, would burst through the door any second, flop down on the couch, and throw his feet up on the table like nothing had happened.

But he wouldn't.

That would never happen again.

Getting used to that thought was unbearably hard.

And imagining what Norawit would feel when he woke up was even worse.

He slept peacefully through the night, his face calm under the medication. But when he opened his eyes again, he would wake up in a world where his brother no longer existed.

God, it was terrifying. Even thinking about it sent a chill crawling down Night's spine.

He couldn't even imagine how everything might have ended if not for the sacrifice North and Damian had made. No one had expected that from them, to be honest. But because of their courage, Nattawat and Norawit were alive.

And dozens of others would survive too.

Because Powerslide no longer existed.

Night looked thoughtfully at his brother, who was still gently running his fingers through Norawit's hair, never once moving from his place. He let out a deep sigh.

They weren't as close as he wished they were.

But he was ready to do anything to change that now, especially after everything that had happened.

Because Nattawat was truly all he had left.

And despite the dull ache in his chest, he felt a strange sense of relief knowing that someone like Hwang had finally gotten what he deserved. Nattawat was finally free from his influence.

Quietly, Night walked over and sat down beside his brother on the bed. Nattawat gave him a sympathetic look and sighed heavily, expressing his support without words.

It seemed like he wanted to say something comforting, but the words never came. Slowly, he looked away again.

His fingers still held Norawit's hand with incredible care, as if it were made of fragile glass. He hadn't let go of it for a second since Norawit fell asleep.

It seemed to calm him, because Norawit didn't twitch or stir from nightmares.

Night didn't say anything either.

He didn't ask questions. He didn't know what to say himself. All he knew was that he needed human warmth right now, and Nattawat had always had plenty of that.

Right now, he just needed his brother.

Suddenly, he lay down on the very edge of the bed and rested his head on Nattawat's lap the way small children often do. With a tired sigh, he closed his eyes.

In a moment when his life felt like complete chaos and everything around him was collapsing, he just wanted to feel needed by someone. Truly needed.

He knew Nattawat loved him, even though he had never said it out loud.

Their relationship had never been the kind where they spoke openly about feelings or allowed themselves sentimentality.

But right now none of that mattered.

Nattawat was the only close person he had left in the entire world.

And not long ago, he had almost lost him too.

The thought alone was terrifying.

Nattawat stares in quiet surprise at the spill of dark hair across his knees and at the way Night is leaning on him—openly, perhaps for the first time in his life. Night is usually so restrained,

so coldly composed, but right now he looks like an ordinary broken person who is simply tired of being strong. Fragile, like a little boy who never knew a mother's or father's love.

Now he searches for even a drop of those precious feelings from the only safe island he has left in this world.

Nattawat exhales slowly and hesitantly reaches out, brushing his fingers through Night's hair, stroking it gently. It feels a little strange. He has never shown this kind of tenderness to anyone except Norawit. Because of that, the gesture feels slightly awkward, unfamiliar—but it seems his brother likes it. At least the trembling running through his whole body has finally stopped.

Nattawat hears his breathing gradually steady, and with growing confidence he continues to comb his fingers through the soft strands.

In that moment, Night feels needed. Completely safe. As if he has returned to the past—to the day they first met. As if Nattawat once again stepped in front of him, shielding him from some cruelty and injustice like a brave knight. And then turned back and told him that he had to learn to stand up for himself.

"If you let people beat you, you'll remain a victim for the rest of your life."

Sound advice—advice that once taught him to be much stronger.

"Thank you," the young man whispers, savoring the softness of those touches.

"You need it," Nattawat replies quietly. "Both of us do."

"I've never needed someone as much as I need you right now."

It's nice to hear. It embarrasses him too, and Nattawat doesn't know how to respond. He only lets out a deep breath.

"Do you regret not stopping us?"

"No. If I'm being honest… I feel relieved that he's dead. The feelings are complicated, but I'm glad it's over," Night answers, squeezing his eyes shut in pain.

"He never deserved your love. He never did."

"I understand that now. You know, for some reason I only say this when something truly horrible happens in our lives, but… you're precious to me," the younger one murmurs.

"I love you, Nightie," Nattawat replies, and even he is surprised by how easily the words come. "I'm not the perfect brother, but from now on I'll watch over you twice as carefully. I don't want to lose you."

"And I don't want to lose you either. I have no one else."

"Then we stay together. We're family, right?"

“You’re right,” Night sighs. “I don’t know why I’ve never said it before, but… I love you too, brother.”

The corner of Nattawat’s lips lifts into a faint half-smile, and something soft trembles inside his chest. It is always comforting to hear those words from someone who truly matters to you.

Once, saying what he felt out loud had been incredibly difficult for him. But because of Norawit, many things have changed. He is no longer afraid to love. Now he knows that this feeling can bring not only the greatest pain—but also the greatest happiness in the world.

“He would have died anyway. I can’t justify my pain with that, but… it makes it easier to accept,” Night whispers, pulling Nattawat from his thoughts.

“No one can know that,” Nattawat answers heavily, still threading his fingers through his hair.

“But he knew,” the young man says almost inaudibly.

“Yes. He was preparing that plan behind our backs.”

“That’s not what I mean. He knew in another way.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had headaches. I think that’s a bad sign.”

“People live their whole lives with headaches.”

“No, you don’t understand. They weren’t ordinary headaches. They were severe attacks, I saw them. But he brushed them off, refused treatment, wouldn’t even talk about them. At night he would wake up because of them, take pills, and fall asleep again. But when he ended up in the hospital, the doctors examined him completely—whether he wanted it or not.”

“They found something bad, didn’t they?”

“I think so,” Night sighs deeply. “I don’t know exactly what. Probably the consequences of his head injuries that he never treated. I think he learned about it a few days ago… though he must have suspected earlier.”

“Do you think that influenced his decision?” Nattawat asks.

“No. I think he would have done it for Norawit even without any reason. Norawit was everything to him. I just realize now how much suffering filled every minute of his life. No one knows what was in his mind before he died, but… I think it’s easier for him now. He wanted to save his brother. That’s a worthy thing—especially since it was usually the other way around,” Night whispers.

“No one expected that from him, did they?” Norawit says quietly. “Everyone thought he was the troubled one… but he solved all our problems with one brave man's decision.”

Nattawat flinches slightly at the sound of his hoarse voice—the first he has heard since everything happened. After that terrible scream, Norawit hadn't spoken at all. Not a single word.

Nattawat immediately looks at him with concern and presses a kiss to his hand.

"I understand why he did it," Norawit continues softly. "Because I would have done the same for him without hesitation. But accepting it… is so hard."

"He saved us. It was insane heroism, but it was so right and so necessary that I can't even fully be angry with him," Nattawat says.

"I'm angry, but… I still can't believe he's gone. How am I supposed to live without him?" Norawit whispers, and his eyes instantly fill with tears.

"Baby," Nattawat says gently, pulling him into a tight embrace, "I'm so sorry. I know that's not enough. Just remember—you're not alone, do you hear me? You will never be alone. I won't leave you. No matter how hard this gets, I'll keep holding your hand. Whenever you start to fall, I'll catch you."

"You're the only one saving me," Norawit answers with a broken breath. "You're the only reason I'm still alive in this world."

Suddenly the sharp sound of Titicharoenrak's phone rings through the room from the nightstand. They all startle, and the others stir awake. It's already late, which makes it strange that someone would message him in the middle of the night, just before dawn.

Norawit frowns in confusion but reaches for the phone anyway.

His heart skips a beat, then begins racing wildly when he realizes what it is.

A message from his brother's number.

Inside is nothing but an audio file.

Most likely it's the message Lim told him about before he died. Maybe it arrived late because of some glitch. Or maybe it was meant to come this way—to give him time to come to his senses before hearing it.

His hands tremble violently. His heart pounds like it's going to burst, and even drawing a breath feels impossibly difficult.

He feels Nattawat's palm gently stroking his shoulder, and it gives him a little strength.

Pulling himself together is still monstrously hard—but the truth is, he wants to hear his voice more than anything. As if hearing it might somehow heal the bleeding wounds inside him and offer a sliver of hope for salvation.

More likely it will tear everything open even further.

But he has to listen.

Because North wanted him to.

Titicharoenrak shifts to sit more comfortably on the bed and waits for the others to gather beside him. Nattawat wraps an arm around his shoulders. Pahn quickly brings him a cup of mint tea and then slips an arm through his. Night and Phuwin sit across from them.

Satang once again offers him a dose of sedative. Norawit nods gratefully and swallows the medicine in one gulp, already knowing he'll need it.

For a few seconds he gathers his courage. Then he looks at his friends—

and finally presses play.

«Hello, Norr.

You're probably not alone right now, so say hello to Nattawat for me too. The two of you are always glued to each other. Sometimes it used to annoy the hell out of me, but lately… I actually liked it.

I'm trying to lead into something important, but it's not really working. This is supposed to be a serious message, and yet, as always, I don't even know what to say. I'm not a person — I'm just one big misunderstanding.

You'll read this when everything has already happened.

I know it's going to hurt you. But I really hope Satang will stuff you full of sedatives, and that little Pahn will make you that sweet mint tea you love so much. You guys are so predictable. Unlike me, right? No one expected something like this from me.

Honestly, that's part of the beauty of it. Everyone was so sure I'd just sit quietly on the sidelines and watch everything unfold that it made my job a lot easier.

Damian came up with a plan that's rough and completely insane. But the best ideas always sound like failures at first. We're going to pull it off in a few hours, and I want to believe it will work.

You're probably wondering how I managed to decide on all this.

The truth? It was easy.

When life puts you in front of a choice this twisted — kill a bastard and save your brother, or stand there and watch him kill the only family you have left — the answer becomes pretty obvious.

I've been thinking a lot. Really thinking. About my life, about what it meant, whether it ever had any value. When you find yourself with one foot already in the grave, your whole

worldview changes.

Something inside me cracked back then.

When I was dying — high out of my mind — I felt… strangely happy. It's weird to say, but everything felt so light. Like I suddenly understood that death was the only way out for me. In those moments there was no pain, and I found myself wanting to feel that again.

I'm tired of pain. But in this world, there's no escaping it. As long as I'm alive, I'll always feel it.

When I came back, I realized something else too — what a complete idiot I've been.

I never managed to be a good brother, a good boyfriend, or even a good friend. Honestly, I never did anything truly worthwhile. I always leaned on you for everything. And at some point I realized that had to stop.

It was time to grow a backbone and do something like a man.

So when Lim gave me even the slightest hope of saving you, I was ready to move mountains. For you. And for Night too.

You'll probably say that blowing up the system wasn't necessary. That if I hadn't done that, I'd still be alive right now.

No, Norr. It really was necessary.

You're a smart guy. You know that if you want to defeat an enemy, it's not enough to destroy just the enemy — you have to destroy their weapons too.

Killing Hwang wouldn't be enough.

Disabling the control devices wouldn't be enough.

Ending the race wouldn't be enough.

The only thing that's enough is ending this once and for all.

This was never just about us or our personal score with that monster. You know that better than anyone. People are dying for someone else's amusement. For them it's just a game… some sick entertainment they bet money on.

But people aren't toys.

What if next time one of our friends becomes their victim? What's going to stop them from continuing this madness?

Who's going to stop them?

We can't be sure that in a couple of years "Powerslide" won't come back into our lives. And then what, brother? "Blast" could be activated again, and you might get dragged into this nightmare all over again.

I won't allow that.

You have to get rid of them forever. Understand?

No one will ever recreate a system like the one Damian Lim built. That bastard put us through hell, but I'm honestly grateful to him. In a strange way, he made me think about my own existence — and those thoughts were worth it.

I never thought I'd say this, but that guy deserves… not forgiveness. No. But understanding.

He's unbelievably intelligent if he managed to create something like this. A genius inventor — that's the truth. And no one will ever come close to what he did. So when it's all over, you can rest easy.

Removing the devices will be safe.

Don't blame yourself, Norr. None of this is your fault. It never was.

I was always my own biggest problem. The only person I ever needed saving from was myself — and that's something you could never do. You tried. You never stopped fighting for me. That's the only reason I lived as long as I did.

But while you were fighting so hard for me, you were losing yourself.

Your own life kept slipping past you… until you met Nattawat.

To be honest, at first he annoyed me a little. I could see he was slowly taking you away from me. But back in Ojai, I realized what you two had was more than some stupid crush.

For the first time, my brother loved someone other than me.

And he was loved just as much in return.

That realization stunned me. But I also saw that, for the first time, you were actually living your own life. So I stepped aside.

And you know what I saw?

A truly happy person.

Carefree. Smiling.

You were shining next to him, even with all the chaos around you.

That's why I'm leaving you here and walking away.

You'll never be alone again. I'm sure of it. He'll protect you from everything. He'll take care of your heart and be the support you need.

Nattawat will do everything I never managed to do.

I've told you before, but I'll say it again — I trust him with you.

Hey, Natt. If you ever hurt him even once, I'll come back from the afterlife and deal with you myself.

For the longest time I thought there was no path where both of us could be happy, Norr.

But I found one.

It's simple — our roads have to split.

I'm dragging you down with me because I'm drowning. I'm sinking, and I'm dying. But you still have to keep moving forward.

Every day I'm falling apart — mentally and physically. And I don't want that destruction to take you down with me when my own personal atomic explosion finally happens.

I'm tired of lying to you, saying I'll get better or that I'll change.

It's not true.

But your faith in me kept me fighting. Thank you for that.

I can't be a happy person in this world. I'm too broken. And I don't want to keep numbing myself with alcohol or drugs.

Sooner or later the end would come anyway — from that, or from the chronic encephalopathy I earned in fights. I've taken too many hits to the head. That doesn't go away without consequences.

I don't want a future where I slowly lose myself to painful decline or Alzheimer's.

As terrifying as it sounds, my salvation is in death.

And yours… is in Nattawat.

He'll help you keep living. It won't be easy, but I know you'll make it. You won't let my death be meaningless. You won't give up.

You have to be happy for both of us, since I couldn't manage it myself.

What I'm about to do is the only decision in my life I've made with a completely clear and calm heart.

I'm not afraid to die, because there's a purpose behind it.

This won't erase all the mistakes I've made. But I hope that when it's over, you'll be proud of me.

Your little brother isn't a coward.

I want to fulfill my dream — to stop disappointing you for once. And I hope this won't just become another failure on that list.

I need to save you to save myself. Do you understand?

More than anything, I want to do at least one truly important thing for you while I still can. And it feels like there's no better moment than now.

I swear I'll kill that bastard. And I'll be happy when I finally see his long-awaited defeat.

Your road of revenge will end here.

And when it does, you'll have to find peace… and smile for me. Promise?

I've said so much already that I don't even know how to end this message.

I just want you to understand me. And not be angry.

I'm doing all of this for both of us.

I want you to be happy.

Our rule works both ways, doesn't it?

Let me go. It will be better this way. Sooner or later you would have had to say goodbye to me anyway. We both know that.

And… thank you.

For everything you've done for me all these years.

You're the best brother anyone could have. You became the family I never had.

The fact that I never managed to spread my wings isn't your fault.

And thank you to Nattawat for everything he'll do for you in my place.

Don't ever let go of each other.

Tell Satang, Phu, and Pahn that they're the best friends I could have ever dreamed of. Thank them for staying on my side even when I was being a complete idiot. They tried to help me, but I never listened.

And yeah… tell the old man I'm sorry for knocking him out. I hope he won't stay mad too long.

My little Night… God, this is the hardest part.

I… he…

Just tell him thank you. For everything. For every day and every moment he gave me. He gave me a chance to feel happier in this world.

If he can… I hope he forgives me for this.

Understands me. Forgives me.

I'm truly happy that I got to know the real him. Tell him that I love him so much.

I know all of you will miss me. But stay together and support each other. It will get easier with time.

We're a family. We always were, and we always will be.

I'll be with you, even if you can't see me.

Maybe I'll be hanging out on the other side with Pond, watching over you like some damn guardian angel.

I regret nothing.

You know how drivers say you can enter any turn in life sideways?

Well then — be the kind of people who know when to slow down… and when to hit the gas.

Change your lives for the better.

Don't become someone like me.

And never let anyone or anything break you.

I love you all.»

His voice fades, and the room falls back into a deafening silence. No one dares speak a word after such a meaningful and beautiful speech. Everyone still hears North's words in their minds, reflecting on everything that had happened to them. He had been so calm, so certain in his decision, fully aware he would die. It was astonishing how easily he spoke of his own death, and of what would happen to them when he was gone. He seemed completely prepared, and that terrified them even more. It felt as if the choice had come to him effortlessly, which only meant that life in this world had truly been unbearable for him.

Norawit couldn't believe that his brother had spoken such important, serious words. Rarely did he open up like this, but in those last hours, he had tried to be utterly honest, revealing a side of himself that even Norawit had never seen. This recording—this voice—was all that

remained now. He would replay it hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. Not once had his tone wavered, unlike with their father. North had truly not feared dying for them; he knew exactly what he was doing. It was unbelievable.

His younger brother, whom he had always protected, had ultimately protected him. He had shown himself to be the strongest person of all. He had given his life for a purpose, and if that wasn't heroism, then what was? Few people could act this way for someone else, even someone they loved. He didn't do it because he wanted to die; he did it because he dreamed of making things right, of setting everything straight in the best possible way. It had been so important to him to leave something meaningful behind, to feel that his life had value—and he had succeeded. He had saved not only his brother and Nattawat, but had destroyed the bastard who deserved the worst fate imaginable. With a single act, he had outmaneuvered them all.

Norawit exhales heavily, closing his eyes that burn with tears, feeling the ache deep within. He rests his head on Nattawat's shoulder, and Nattawat immediately takes his hand, intertwining their fingers. Instantly, he lets him know that, just as North had promised, he would never be alone in this world again.

A vivid memory surfaces in Titicharoenrak's mind, one from the recent past that now feels incredibly important because it carries a new, almost prophetic meaning. At the time, he hadn't even realized how prophetic North's words would become.

The Pacific Coast. The beautiful Venice Beach, one of their family's favorite vacation spots in all of Los Angeles when their parents were alive. A guitar melody floated softly through the air, and a man nearby hummed a gentle song. Everything was peaceful, comforting. The large waves rolled slowly, colliding with each other with a soothing murmur. The sun sank behind the horizon, painting the sky in a breathtaking palette of dark blues, orange, and hints of pink.

That evening, he sat alone on the warm sand, shoes off, away from everyone. He gazed at the clear sky, marveling at its colors and the fleeting beauty of the day. Then his brother joined him. Back then, their biggest problems were only just beginning, and he hadn't realized that North was speaking entirely seriously.

"What do you dream about, Northie?"

"What do I dream about?" North asked, puzzled, shaking his head.

"Yes. I've noticed that little things can make me happy. Turns out, if you focus on what's here, on the now, instead of waiting for something bigger, you can live a pretty happy life. When everything feels awful, I think about them, and it eases the pain somehow. I love dreaming. Who can take that from me?"

"Like… what things?"

Norawit inhales deeply, tasting the sweetness of the nearby snacks and fast food, closing his eyes as he basks in the warmth of the evening breeze.

“The sun, the sound of the ocean, a good breakfast, the mountains, the purring of Jumu, peonies, summer rain and the smell of wet dust on the road afterward, the rustle of book pages, music, my mom’s laughter, fireworks, pink pads on cat paws, vanilla ice cream with chocolate chips, the scent of blooming cherry blossoms,” he says with a gentle smile. “I dream of having as many of these small but important things in my life as possible. And I dream of waking up happy every morning. Is that too much? No, but it’s so hard to actually feel it and hold onto it. And I want you to smile. Find what brings you that same joy. What about you—what do you dream about?”

“To stop disappointing you,” the boy whispers after a moment, looking at him. “I don’t need much in this life. Just for you to be happy. When you’re happy, I’m happy. It’s our law, and it works both ways. When I feel terrible, you feel the same. I dream of ending that. I want to do something important, something good, in this life for you at least once. I want to be a good brother.”

And he had done it. He had always underestimated himself as a brother, but to Norawit, he had always been the best, even if he had made mistakes. He had fulfilled his little dream—finished it all and done one single, incredibly important and powerful thing for him. He would probably never be completely happy again after what happened, because part of his soul had died forever on that closed “Powerslide” track. But, as North had said, it was their unbreakable law. If it had brought him some relief, then he would strive to be happy in his memory.

“You will always be the best brother to me,” Norawit whispers, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I’m so proud of you, Northie.”

Chapter 17: Epilogue

Norawit moves slowly down the long corridor, his feet whispering softly against the floor in white hospital slippers. They look a little ridiculous, honestly, but everyone here is dressed exactly the same. Pale blue pajamas, identical slippers. No exceptions.

He nods politely to the doctors he passes, offering the same easy smile as always, and gives a small wave to the guy from the next room. They've grown close lately, though the other patient's condition is still pretty bad. Norawit, on the other hand, is doing much better.

People blur past him in a constant stream. Everyone is in a hurry—patients heading to lunch, doctors rushing between responsibilities, visitors eager to see their loved ones. And yet, despite all this motion, the place never feels chaotic. It's always calm. No one raises their voice here.

It's around noon now. Outside, the summer sun shines brightly, filling everything with a soft, golden warmth. Its rays slip through thick glass and sheer curtains, spilling into the corridor in a gentle glow. The light fractures in curious ways, scattering reflections along the walls, little flickers that dance like quiet echoes of something alive.

The private clinic where he has spent the last six months sits along the first stretch of coastline just outside Los Angeles. The area is quiet, almost deserted, miles without towering buildings or the usual noise of the city. That's what makes the ocean view and the air here feel so extraordinary. Every morning and evening, Norawit watches the horizon, taking in the kind of sunrises and sunsets that feel almost unreal. It soothes him.

He watches the sun rise and fall in full view, as if reminding everyone that endings and beginnings are part of the same cycle. Life doesn't stop. It keeps going—no matter what. Even if, for him, the world will never be the same again.

He likes it here, even though he misses home terribly. He misses his friends, even if they visit often. He misses Nattawat, who never once let a day pass without checking in on him. He misses Jumu and the soft rumble of his purring. He misses warm breakfasts and gentle morning kisses. Late-night walks. His brother.

There's so much he misses. But being here… this is necessary. He knows that. He knows he needs this help—because on his own, he couldn't overcome his flaws, or the weight of everything going on inside his head.

Right now, he longs to feel the California sun on his skin, the soft wind in his hair, the fine sand beneath his feet. But life here follows a strict schedule. He can't just step outside whenever he wants, can't wander freely without permission—and leaving the facility altogether is strictly forbidden.

At first, those rules infuriated him. The control felt suffocating, almost unbearable. He didn't understand how anyone could live like that. But eventually… he got used to it. People get used to anything, in the end. Even pain, the kind that once feels impossible to endure.

That pain is exactly what brought him here.

No one forced him. He admitted himself. Asked to be brought here when he realized he had lost control.

The six months before that were a waking nightmare.

After North died, something inside him broke. Completely. He was unraveling, losing himself piece by piece, unable to understand what was happening to him. The pain grew stronger every day, hollowing him out, turning everything inside him numb. The good parts of him were drowned out by rage, despair, and something unbearably heavy.

He became someone he never wanted to be.

He started drinking again—too much, too often. Entire days, even weeks, blurred into nothing. He still couldn't remember parts of that time. And when he drank, something darker took over. A wild, uncontrollable aggression that terrified even him.

With each passing day, he realized he was slowly turning into his brother—the same brother who had been slipping downhill for years.

All that time, Nattawat tried to pull him back. He begged him to come to his senses, forgave everything—every outburst, every mistake. But eventually, something between them cracked.

Their arguments grew more frequent. More violent. And when they turned into actual fights, it became clear just how close they were to falling apart completely. There were moments when it felt like they might actually kill each other, and that realization frightened them both.

Nattawat endured everything. Every bit of it. He carried that pain alongside him, cried with him, put up with the breakdowns, the drinking—waited silently while Norawit stumbled through another night of excess. No one had ever cared for him like that.

He searched for him at night, calling around, checking bars, tracking him down across the city. Sometimes he'd find him barely conscious, and still bring him home. He listened to drunken insults, fought back when he had to, but he never left.

He stayed. No matter what.

But the night their fight spiraled completely out of control, when they were throwing anything they could get their hands on at each other, something changed. For the first time, Nattawat looked ready to give up.

And Norawit saw it.

He saw real fear in his eyes. Not fear of the situation—fear of him. Of who he had become.

It hit like a bucket of ice water.

In that moment, Norawit understood he could lose the one thing that truly mattered to him. He realized, with sudden clarity, that the life he was forcing Nattawat to endure mirrored the boy's own painful childhood—the years spent fighting for a mother lost to alcoholism.

How could he do that to him? He couldn't.

No matter what it took, he had to hold on to the only family he had left. He couldn't let Nattawat walk away. Not after everything.

Not when they loved each other this much.

Titicharoenrak wouldn't even allow himself to imagine a life without him. After his brother's death, that had become his greatest fear, the one thing that terrified him more than anything else in the world. He was so deeply afraid of being alone.

From that moment on, he never let their arguments go that far again—never to the point of breaking, never to violence. And when the pain inside him finally reached its unbearable peak, he understood with absolute clarity: he needed professional help.

What truly scared him was the moment he felt himself ready to give up completely. For the first time since losing North, the thought of ending his own life crossed his mind, and it shook him to the core. That was when he decided: *enough*.

He had to pull himself together. He had to fight. Otherwise, he would never fulfill North's last wish.

That same evening, he came home, sank to the floor in front of the person he loved most, and asked for help. He rested his head on his knees, whispering apologies over and over again—hundreds of times—begging to be forgiven.

Nattawat was stunned. For a few long minutes, he couldn't even respond. But deep down, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief—because he, too, knew they couldn't survive this alone. Norawit was slipping away right before his eyes, and there was nothing he could do to save him.

Helplessness, there was nothing worse than that.

The very next day, Night found the best rehabilitation and psychological treatment center in all of Los Angeles, paid for everything, and personally brought the soul that needed saving here. Norawit didn't resist. He knew they were doing this because he was family—because it was the only way to save him.

And so, for the past six long months, he had been living here, fighting his demons.

Now he walks through the cafeteria, listening to the soft hum of voices around him. He picks up a tray and chooses his lunch, almost like he's back in school. The food here is always good, but his favorite days are when they serve plenty of fruit and orange juice—and today happens to be one of them.

His mood lifts instantly.

He settles at his favorite table by the window and begins to eat. One of the perks of an expensive private clinic is the small comforts—like being able to watch TV during lunch. It's the closest thing to luxury they have here. Usually, it's the news first, then some light, comforting movie. He likes listening to what's happening in the city—it makes him feel, at least a little, connected to the outside world.

Even after all this time, people still haven't forgotten that high-profile case… or the hypocritical judge at the center of it.

He once heard that after the truth about Nuthwang's life came out, several police departments across California were subjected to federal investigations. Many of his associates were immediately fired or arrested. The investigations and trials were still ongoing, targeting everyone involved in his dirty dealings. His network had been vast—but now, it was exposed.

And that… that was something to be glad about.

People had taken it seriously. Real action had been taken. Exposing that bastard had been necessary. Who knew how many connections he had beyond the state? So many details had surfaced, so many other monsters uncovered—it was terrifying to think about what might have happened if things had gone differently.

If not for Night's actions that night, people might still be talking about what a "good man" Nut Jirochtikul was.

The only thing that truly bothered Norawit was what happened to Damian Lim's name.

It had been dragged through absolute filth.

No one knew that he was the one who stopped his own father, who had saved who knows how many lives through that single, brave act. The entire city only talked about how his empire had been built on blood. They branded him something close to a traitor, throwing the ugliest, most degrading words at his memory.

Maybe, in some ways, he deserved judgment for his sins. But Norawit didn't see him as a monster.

His name would never be cleared. And now, Norawit understood why he made that final choice. He had known how it would all end. He had always been one step ahead—and this, too, he had anticipated.

He chose to remove himself from the equation.

Because otherwise, he would have spent the rest of his life paying for his father's crimes. They would have torn him apart. He would have been the one imprisoned, the one the whole world hated. And he refused to become a scapegoat.

Norawit lets out a quiet, heavy sigh as he watches his photo on the TV screen, then slowly lowers his gaze to the salad on his plate. The report talks about people calling to demolish

“Limhouse,” organizing protests to make it happen. A multimillion-dollar corporation—reduced to dust by the truth.

And not a single person in the city speaks in Damian’s defense.

Even knowing everything.

Norawit doesn’t try to justify him. But it feels like the guy has already been through enough. At the very least, he deserves to be left in peace now that he’s gone.

But people won’t stop. They’ll keep talking, keep tearing him apart, forgetting that he was just a boy, broken by his own father.

People can be so cruel.

Norawit understands them, in a way. But hearing all that venom about someone who saved his life at the cost of his own… it hurts.

Damian deserves to be remembered. If only because he truly was a genius.

A familiar hand suddenly sets down a small cup of ice cream on the white table in front of him.

Vanilla with chocolate chips, his favorite.

There’s only one person who ever brings him contraband sweets like that.

Nattawat leans down, wrapping his arms gently around Norawit’s shoulders from behind, pulling him into a soft embrace. Then he presses a tender kiss to the top of his head.

For a few quiet seconds, he just stays there—holding him close, breathing him in—because he missed him more than words could ever say.

Norawit smiles brightly, soaking in this quiet, familiar expression of love. This—*this*—is the moment he waits for every single day. Nothing ever stops Nattawat. Not bad weather, not the dozens of kilometers he has to travel just to see him. For six months straight, he’s shown up every day without fail, just to spend a little time by his side.

“Hey, baby,” Nattawat says softly, smiling.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Norawit replies, turning his head toward him.

Their lips meet almost instantly. Nattawat’s kiss is gentle, careful, but filled with more longing than anything else in the world. Norawit exhales quietly, relief washing through him, and he could swear this is the best moment of his entire day.

Every time they kiss after being apart, it feels like he comes back to life. Everything inside him resets, falls into place. His heart beats differently. Breathing becomes easier. As if, from the moment Nattawat leaves until the moment he returns, he isn’t really living at all.

This is his cure. His answer to everything.

Nattawat presses a few more quick kisses to his lips, smiling, then finally sits down across from him, studying him like he hasn't seen him in years. He likes watching Norawit eat like this—with real appetite—because back home, getting him to eat even a little had been nearly impossible. Back then, his main "meal" had been bitter gin.

Now, though… he looks better. Noticeably better. Every time, the change is clearer. Even in his face, in the way his emotions settle—there's progress. Life without alcohol is clearly doing him good.

His skin has regained that warm caramel tone, and he smiles more often now. After North's death, that smile had felt like something mythical—something people talked about but never actually saw. It took months before it returned, even faintly.

His eyes, though… they're still heavy with sadness. Grief doesn't disappear that easily.

Nattawat's gaze lingers, soft and intent, tracing his grown-out hair, now almost entirely back to its natural dark color. It feels unfamiliar. He misses the light brown—but honestly, he loves him any way he is.

"What?" Norawit asks, frowning slightly as he continues eating his sliced fruit. "Why are you staring?"

"You look beautiful," Nattawat says, smiling warmly.

"Better?"

"Much better."

"I'm trying," Norawit replies, offering a small, shy smile.

"I know. How do you feel?"

"Good."

"Really? Or are you just trying to reassure me?" Nattawat asks, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"No, really. They say I'm making great progress. I don't feel the urge to drink anymore… but the rest isn't that simple. That'll take time."

"As much time as you need. Stay here until you're truly ready to leave."

"I think I am, actually. I'll finish the program and come home."

"And the aggression?"

"I've got it under control," Norawit nods.

“No relapses?”

“None.”

“What about impulsiveness?”

“I’ve learned to stay balanced.”

“I’m really glad to hear that,” Nattawat says, reaching for his hand. “You have to be incredibly strong to survive everything you’ve been through. There’s something unbreakable in you. I admire you.”

“My biggest problem was the drinking. That’s gone now. As for the rest… I might be working through those scars for the rest of my life,” Norawit says, casually feeding him a bite of dessert like he always used to. “I want to go home. I need to get back to real life.”

“You sure you can handle it out there?” Nattawat asks around a mouthful, half-smiling. “I don’t doubt you, I just want you to feel okay.”

“I think I can. I’ve got you, don’t I?”

“I’m really proud of you,” Nattawat says softly, brushing his fingers over Norawit’s. “I miss you like crazy. I can’t even sleep without you.”

“Still hugging my pillow?” Norawit teases.

“Every night. It’s the only way I fall asleep. I can’t wait until I’m back in your arms.”

“I can’t sleep without your snoring,” Norawit smirks. “Got too used to it. Silence feels weird now.”

“Hey, I do *not* snore,” Nattawat protests, scrunching his face before breaking into laughter.

Norawit rolls his eyes, smiling fondly. He always denies it so earnestly, like admitting something so small might somehow change things between them. It’s ridiculous. He’s perfect —even when he snores.

As Norawit watches him, his heart starts racing again, just like the first time. So much time has passed, and yet his feelings have only grown stronger. Is that even possible? Every time he thinks he’s reached the limit, he’s proven wrong.

“Want to go for a walk?” Nattawat asks, watching him happily dig into his ice cream. “I want some time alone with you.”

“I’m probably not allowed,” Norawit mutters, not even looking up, frowning like a stubborn kid. “It’s not walk time.”

“I already arranged it. Come on, I know how much you love watching the waves.”

Without waiting for an answer, Nattawat laces their fingers together and leads him outside, toward the stretch of Pacific coastline that belongs to the rehab center.

The moment they step outside, Norawit takes a deep breath, filling his lungs with fresh air, and instantly feels lighter. Like he hasn't been out in days, even though they were in the park just last night.

Still… the restrictions weigh on him more and more. He's gotten used to this life, sure—but that doesn't mean it doesn't suffocate him sometimes. Asking permission for everything isn't who he is. He's always lived on his own terms, making his own choices.

This brief taste of freedom feels like a reminder.

Out there—beyond these walls—is a different life. Not controlled, not sheltered. Real.

The life he used to know.

And if he's honest… it scares him.

Maybe he's rushing things. Maybe he's not as ready as he thinks.

But if he doesn't try, he'll never know.

This place has helped him, there's no doubt about that. But sooner or later, he'll have to step beyond these walls and face the world again.

They walk almost all the way down to the water before settling on the shore. Norawit's gaze immediately drifts to the waves, full of quiet wonder, as the wind slips through his hair.

Nattawat kneels beside him and carefully pulls off those ridiculous slippers, then takes off his own. The moment Norawit's bare feet sink into the warm sand, his face lights up like a carefree child's. He wiggles his toes, slowly burying them deeper, smiling to himself.

For some reason, right now—he feels free.

He hasn't felt that in a long time. Not with all the rules, all the restrictions.

The long waves roll in gently, one after another, their soft rhythm breaking against the shore and leaving delicate, winding patterns behind. Just looking at it calms something deep inside him. Sometimes, it works better than anything he's learned in therapy.

The ocean… such a simple thing. And yet, here, it's forbidden.

They're not allowed to get close. For six months now, the thing that once brought him the most peace has been just out of reach. He can look, but not touch. Not feel it, not breathe it in fully, not swim, not step into it.

Like it's nothing more than a beautiful picture behind glass.

But Nattawat gives him this small, stolen moment of happiness anyway—because he knows how much it means to him. He always does things like this. Visiting him, bringing sweets, simply being there—he brings him a kind of peace nothing else can.

Norawit used to think time healed everything.

It doesn't.

Nattawat does.

He studies his face for a long time—and, hopelessly, falls all over again. Everything about him stirs something overwhelming. His nose, his smile that makes Norawit's chest tighten, the tiny moles, those impossibly beautiful eyes…

Norawit feels like he could melt under the quiet, effortless warmth of him.

Nattawat can be so boyish, so light—and then, in the blink of an eye, turn into the most devastatingly attractive man Norawit has ever seen. There's a quiet strength in him, something deep and unshakable, but he never flaunts it. He just endures. Takes whatever life throws at him and keeps going.

If anyone knows how to survive… it's him.

Sometimes, Norawit almost can't believe he's real. Like if he reached out and touched him right now, he might disappear—just another beautiful mirage.

"The guys said hi, by the way," Nattawat says, smiling faintly as he leans back into the warmth. "They're all coming together at the end of the week."

"I miss them," Norawit murmurs, resting his head in Nattawat's lap. "It's always chaos when they visit. So loud they practically get kicked out."

"Yeah, they're a mess," Nattawat laughs, running his fingers through his hair, studying his face.

"How are they?"

"Good. Satang's still helping me at work. And 'PhuPahn' officially moved in together."

"They've basically been living together for over a year already," Norawit says, frowning slightly.

"Yeah, but now they're not pretending it's casual anymore. They're basically a married couple."

"You think they'll actually get married?" Norawit asks, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"I don't know, baby. You remember how they fight," Nattawat says, tracing a finger lightly over his nose and lips. "How many times have they broken up? I've lost count."

“Hey, we fight too,” Norawit protests. “So what, we’re not getting married either?”

“Oh? You want to?” Nattawat smirks.

“Someday.”

“Then someday we’ll talk about it,” he replies, leaning down to steal a quick kiss.

Norawit stretches out on the warm sand, his head still resting on Nattawat’s lap, soaking in the sunlight. In this moment, it feels like all his problems have simply… disappeared.

Nattawat gently plays with his hair, brushes his knuckles along his cheeks, and the tenderness of it feels essential, like something he needs to breathe. Norawit watches the wind tangle softly through his wavy hair, the way he squints at the bright light, smiling.

So alive. So beautiful.

For a moment, it’s just the two of them—completely alone.

Norawit almost wishes he had a camera. He wants to capture this forever: the endless blue sky, the sun, the quiet ocean, the whisper of waves, the white sand, the breeze… and Nattawat’s smile—the one that makes his knees weak every single time. Those eyes, filled with something so pure it almost hurts.

This is what happiness looks like.

This is home.

No matter where he is, that feeling only ever comes back when Nattawat is with him. He’s the one who makes everything feel right—who makes any place feel like it belongs.

Norawit reaches up, resting his hand against Nattawat’s neck, gently tracing the warm skin with his fingers. Beneath them, he feels the faint, raised line of a scar—and remembers he has one just like it.

Another reminder of everything they’ve survived… just to be here, breathing, together.

“How’s Night?” Norawit asks suddenly.

“Better. Throwing himself into work,” Nattawat says with a soft laugh, shaking his head. “I hover over him all the time, you should see it. I just… want to take care of him. He’s family. We’ve gotten closer. More honest with each other.”

“He likes that?”

“I think so. He calls me a lot now, comes by. It’s… different. In a good way.”

“Normal?” Norawit smiles faintly.

“Yeah. Normal. Not perfect, but… better. We used to feel like strangers. Now he feels like someone I can really call my own.” He pauses, then adds quietly, “Only you’re closer.”

“I’m really glad things got better between you,” Norawit says, frowning slightly. “He still misses him, doesn’t he? He doesn’t visit me much… it’s probably hard for him.”

“You remind him of him sometimes,” Nattawat explains, brushing his fingers through Norawit’s dark strands. “When you were drinking… the hair, too. But he always asks about you. He misses you. We all miss him.”

“I hate to admit it,” Norawit mutters with a bitter little laugh, “but I almost miss Lim too.”

“Speaking of him… I’ve got some news,” Nattawat says, exhaling slowly. “That guy keeps surprising people—even now.”

“You’re making me nervous,” Norawit says, tensing slightly. “What did he do?”

“It’s… good news, I think. I don’t even know how to react,” Nattawat admits, staring out at the waves. “Someone called me yesterday. Asked to meet. I saw him before coming here.”

“And?”

“Damian’s lawyer.”

Norawit raises his brows, confused, trying to process why that would involve them at all.

“What did he want? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing like that,” Nattawat says, pulling a small golden key from his pocket. “This… was for me.”

“What is it?” Norawit asks, sitting up.

“Damian left it. You won’t believe what it opens.” Nattawat lets out a quiet, disbelieving laugh. “A bank vault. In my name.”

“A vault?”

“Not just a box. A full vault.”

“What’s inside?”

Nattawat hesitates for a second, then exhales.

“Everything.”

“…What do you mean, everything?”

“His money.”

Norawit’s eyes go wide, comically wide, as the meaning sinks in.

"…You're kidding."

"I wish," Nattawat mutters. "Not literally everything—probably so it wouldn't raise too many suspicions—but most of it. You have no idea how much cash is in there. He planned all of it. Moved money through fake accounts, withdrew it overseas, brought it back here under another name… The trail disappears halfway across the world. Even now, he outplayed everyone."

Norawit sits up slowly, stunned.

"What name?"

"Kyle Osman," Nattawat says quietly.

Norawit blinks.

"Osman… like your mom? And Abigail?"

"Yeah. Probably his real name," Nattawat says, handing him a photograph. "This was in the vault too."

Norawit studies it carefully. A young woman stands on the porch of a house, he recognizes her immediately. Abigail. And in her arms, a small dark-haired boy, maybe five years old.

Damian.

There's no mistaking him—the blue eyes, the dimples in his wide smile.

Norawit turns the photo over.

In messy, childish handwriting, it reads: *"I miss you, Mom."*

The paper is worn, creased, like it's been folded and hidden a hundred times. Maybe it was all he had left of her.

Below it, in neat adult handwriting:

"I was born an Osman, but became a Jirochtikul. You were born a Jirochtikul, but always remained an Osman. That's why you were worth fighting our father for."

"…Wow," Norawit exhales, shaken. "He's right, you know. You've always been more like an Osman. Kind. Strong. Human. I don't see any of that in your insane father."

"Because it was never there," Nattawat says with a faint smirk. "That came from my mom."

"So… how rich are you now?" Norawit asks, handing the photo back.

"Honestly? No idea. My account has… a lot of zeros."

Norawit raises a brow, a slow smile forming.

“I really want to make a joke right now…”

“Don’t,” Nattawat laughs, quickly kissing his cheek. “I already know what you’re going to say.”

“Too bad. Because you’re basically a damn millionaire now and my—”

“Stop,” Nattawat laughs again.

“Fine. What are you going to do with it?” Norawit asks, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

“I don’t know,” Nattawat admits. “It feels weird. Like some cliché inheritance story. I can’t refuse it… but I’m not ready to accept it either. I’ll just leave it there for now. Maybe someday… we’ll need it.”

“No,” Norawit says softly, leaning in to kiss him. “We’re done owing anything to anyone.”

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Two years later…

The flap of a hummingbird’s wing can stir a tidal wave on the far side of the world. The “butterfly effect” is a beautiful theory—one that says the smallest change can set off a chain of events that ends in something vast and irreversible. The lesson is simple and cruel: the tiniest cracks in the past can grow into disasters in the present. And you never really grasp the scale of what’s coming until it finally hits you—or the people you love.

Norawit never imagined he would become the kind of person who loses everything. He chased a foolish idea of revenge so blindly that he destroyed the only thing he had left. He should have been saving his brother instead of trying to numb himself by playing the avenger. But regret came too late to matter.

A thousand small circumstances led them both to that path. Now North was gone, and Norawit was learning how to live without him. It felt impossible at first, and yet nearly a thousand and ninety-five days had passed—and the world had not ended. The earth still turned, the sun still burned, the air still filled his lungs. People went on as if nothing had changed. But for him, everything had. He lived inside his own quiet apocalypse, one that sometimes pulled him so deep he could barely find his way back out.

He had known, of course, that his brother had been slipping for a long time. But everything reached its breaking point just when Norawit had started to believe things might finally get

better. That was the cruelest part—he had believed in a future that never existed. He hadn't seen how much worse North had become. Now, with time behind him, he understood the reasons for what happened. And strangely, with each passing day, that understanding only deepened his pride.

For ten long years, North had carried an endless ocean of pain inside himself—disappointment, shame, despair, grief. It kept growing, swallowing him whole. He ran from it however he could—through alcohol, through drugs, through reckless fights where physical pain dulled the ache inside. But in the end, he lost that battle. Or maybe "lost" wasn't the right word. His life simply reached the ending he chose for himself—the only ending that felt bearable. He had never been able to choose how to live, but he chose how to end it, if only to escape the torment.

Three years later, it was a little easier to think about. But accepting it still felt unbearable. Norawit's world had been permanently rewritten the moment his brother disappeared from it. The only thing keeping him afloat was the person who had stayed—who had become everything to him: his air, his sun, his moon. His entire, fragile universe. For three years, Nattawat had never left his side. Every day, they moved through grief together, step by step. At first, it felt like a pain beyond anything human, something that broke every limit. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, life began to return.

The first year had been hell. Six months lost in alcohol, in shouting matches and broken things—followed by six more spent trying to heal. Norawit still felt ashamed of so much, but Nattawat had never walked away. He stayed. He held his hand. He helped him survive the worst of it.

And in him, Norawit found something like salvation.

When he lost his parents, he had poured all his grief into caring for his younger brother. Now, he did the same again—but this time, toward Nattawat. Because now, he had no one else left to love. And so, he loved him too much, too fiercely, as if trying to fill an emptiness that could never truly be filled.

He knew North would never have left if he believed Norawit would be alone in the world. Never like that. That was why he had trusted Nattawat with him—it hadn't just been a request, but a quiet promise between them. Even then, he must have known what was coming.

Norawit never blamed him. Not once. All he felt was an endless ache—sharp, constant, unrelenting.

There was no anger in his heart. No disappointment. Only love—and pride. His brother had left behind something final, something meaningful. He had given them a chance to survive. He had avenged the pain that had haunted them, the loss of their parents. And somehow, against all logic, that brought Norawit a fragile sense of peace.

The one who deserved punishment had received it. And North… North had finally found rest.

It was a terrible truth to accept, but deep down, Norawit knew it was necessary. Life had broken his brother beyond repair. No matter how hard they tried, no one could have pulled him back. And there was nothing more painful than realizing someone you love had been dying inside long before their body followed—and that you were powerless to stop it.

Because in the end, North's greatest enemy had been himself.

And that was a battle Norawit could never fight for him.

He understood now that grief demands to be lived through completely. It doesn't fade until it has passed through every part of you—until you've breathed it in, cried it out, screamed it into the dark, until it pierces your heart and finally settles there. Over time, you learn to live with it. Not without it—with it.

It would never stop hurting. Not really. But it would become something he could carry.

And that was enough.

That was what North would have wanted.

A single second can change everything. But we don't always get to choose how. Life is made of moments—each one different, each one necessary. Joyful or painful, fleeting or unforgettable—they shape who we are. And none of them can ever be lived twice.

North Titicharoenrak had been one of those moments.

The most precious one. The happiest—and the most painful. Irreplaceable.

The place he left behind in Norawit's heart would remain empty forever.

He was gone now, part of something endless. But he had left behind a story—complicated, flawed, and, in its own way, beautiful.

He had never been perfect. He never tried to be. He was kind. Naive. Sometimes weak. But more than anything, he had simply been strong for far too long.

He made mistakes. Too many. Often selfish, often reckless. But at the very end, for the first time, he wasn't selfish at all.

To give his life the way he did—to save someone he loved, to save others—that was a death worthy of respect.

A small, quiet hero who saved his own world.

A world named Norawit Titicharoenrak.

And maybe that was the final proof that he had never been as worthless as he believed.

Something in him must have truly broken that night he nearly killed himself with drugs.

Norawit suddenly flinches, startled by the cool touch of a hand against his cheek. He blinks, pulled out of his thoughts, and exhales slowly.

The TV screen flickers in front of him—white credits rolling over black—and he realizes he's home.

They had set up a movie night, just like that time in Ojai. Only now, it wasn't under the open sky, but in their living room. The air smelled of pizza and caramel popcorn. The floor was covered in soft blankets and bright pillows.

And beside him, Nattawat sat quietly.

The biggest, most beautiful eyes in the world look at him, trembling with emotion. Carefully, the boy pries open the fingers clenched so tightly in his grip. On the inside of his palm, crescent-shaped marks from short nails remain once again, and Natt gently presses a kiss to each one.

Titicharoerak quickly scans the room, his gaze flickering over everything, then exhales in relief as his sense of place returns. He's really home. His safe haven exists within these walls covered in tiny floral wallpaper—here, beside Nattawat, with a soft, purring white bundle curled up on his lap.

The moment he fully realizes where he is, the sudden wave of panic fades just as quickly as it came. Each soothing kiss brings him the relief he needs. Comfort settles in almost instantly, and at last, he relaxes.

This happens to him often. He's terrified of being alone. Sometimes he simply slips out of reality, spiraling into a hollow, destructive haze. It's one of the aftereffects of what he went through—at least, that's what his therapist says. Natt had insisted he keep going even after rehab ended. Most likely, this is something he'll live with for the rest of his life: seeing a specialist, talking through his feelings for as long as it takes. He doesn't resist it—because he never wants to fall apart again and go back to where they started.

"Hey, baby," the boy calls softly, brushing his cheek with tender fingers. "It's okay. I'm here. You're not alone."

The Doberman dozing peacefully on the floor seems to catch the anxiety in his new owner's voice and reacts instantly, as always. The dog tenses, ready to protect him in a heartbeat. His sharp ears perk up; after studying the situation with a wary look, he relaxes and walks over to Norawit, resting his head on his knees as if offering quiet support.

Living with him had been easy. He was perfectly trained and, despite his intimidating appearance, genuinely kind—just like his former owner. Taking him in had been Nattawat's decision. It was a gesture of gratitude to Damian, a way to preserve his memory. After all, he had given his life to save them.

They couldn't ignore that.

They didn't speak of him often, but his name no longer brought anger or bitterness. As North had once said, Lim deserved understanding. While the rest of the world hated him, they remembered him in silence—as the strangest bastard they'd ever known, with a good but cold heart.

Titicharoenrak gently strokes Wan's head and lets out a quiet sigh. Inside, something tightens again—the lingering residue of that sticky, suffocating fear. It doesn't throw them off balance anymore. They both know how to deal with it. It's like panic attacks—you can live with them, fight through them. Eventually, it will pass. It just takes time. When enough time has gone by and the wounds inside stop bleeding so fiercely, it will get easier.

For now, all they can do is wait—and keep fighting not to break.

"Again?" Nattawat asks, concern in his voice as he places a hand on his neck. "An episode?"

"I'm okay," Norawit says, shaking his head. "I just got lost in thought."

"About North?"

"…Yeah," he nods softly, eyes lowered. "About everything."

"It's normal to miss him. Especially for you," Nattawat murmurs, tracing his fingers gently over the scar left behind by the control device they'd removed long ago. "We'll get through it, okay?"

"Yeah," Titicharoenrak answers, pulling him closer, pressing his nose into the warm hollow at the base of his neck. "What would I do without you, baby?"

"You'll never have to find out," Nattawat says with a soft smile, threading his fingers through the hair at the back of his head.

"I'm so scared of losing you. You know you're literally everything I have, right?"

"You tell me that every day. Sometimes more than once."

"And I'll say it a million more. If I could, I'd tie you to me and never let you go, not even for a second."

"Love me that much, huh?" Nattawat smirks, pulling back slightly.

"More than anything," Norawit replies, kissing him softly, like he's sealing the truth of his words.

"My 'koi no yokan,'" Nattawat whispers against his lips, smiling. "I love you too."

The kiss is calm, gentle—almost healing—but still threaded with quiet passion, as always. In moments like this, it's hard for Titicharoenrak not to spiral into heavy emotions, so Nattawat usually distracts him in a way they both know well—he seduces him. But sometimes something simple helps just as much. That's how he got him into cooking together, which often turned into warm, homely dinners.

Today, though, he has another idea—one that's been on his mind for a while. He doesn't want Norawit to sink too deeply into his thoughts, so he decides to pull him out of them.

Reluctantly, he breaks away from those tempting lips, stealing a few more quick kisses with a soft groan before studying the face in front of him. He smiles.

He loves seeing that spark of life in those brown eyes—the one that only appears when he's there. The moment Nattawat leaves for work or even steps out for a few hours, that fragile drive inside him flickers and fades.

And he can't deny it—he likes being needed like that. It makes him feel essential, loved, as if he could place the entire world in Norawit's hands. There's no way to put it into words. There's nothing better than being the center of someone else's universe.

And right now, for Titicharoenrak, he is exactly that.

He is his whole world, and he loves him enough for everyone who never did.

"The movie's over," Norawit says, brushing his nose against his. "What do we do now?"

"What do you suggest?" Nattawat asks playfully.

"Anything you want. Distract me. I don't want to ruin the night again with my thoughts… it was so perfect."

"Mmm… I think I know something that'll distract you," Nattawat murmurs into his ear, kissing the soft skin beneath it. "Will you trust me?"

"Do whatever you want with me, baby," Titicharoenrak replies, eyes fluttering shut in pleasure.

"Good," Nattawat says, trailing a line of sweet kisses down his neck. "Then go to the bathroom."

"The bathroom?"

"Yeah. Go. And take off your clothes."

"…That sounds promising. Want me in the bath?" Norawit asks, thumbs brushing over his waist.

"I do, but first, you're going to do something for me," Nattawat says, still kissing him.

"I'm in," he whispers, breath uneven. "Especially if you keep kissing me like that."

"Good boy," Nattawat smirks, his warm breath suddenly burning against his skin. "Come on. While you're this obedient, I want to take advantage of it."

Half an hour later, Nattawat sits on a wooden chair in the bathroom, barely holding back a smile as he watches his boyfriend's annoyed expression.

Furrowed brows. Pouted lips. A glare that clearly says this was not how he imagined the evening ending.

Titicharoenrak sits on his lap, legs spread wide, carefully brushing dark dye into the roots of his light hair. He'd expected something very different from their little home date—but still, it felt good to be trusted with something like this.

Nattawat had grown fond of being blond—he'd kept it for nearly three years—but lately, he'd been craving something darker. Coloring his hair had become a habit, though usually Pahn handled it. But she wasn't in Los Angeles right now.

She and Phu had gone on vacation to the Caribbean. Their friend had worked hard to give her that gift.

Nattawat smiles slyly, his breathing quickening as he drinks in the elegant curve of Norawit's collarbones and that tiny mole just above them—details that practically beg to be kissed, slowly, indulgently. The soft rise of bone beneath skin feels like an open invitation, one he's barely resisting.

Norawit is wearing one of his old T-shirts—the kind you don't mind ruining with paint. It hangs loose, stretched with time, slipping off his shoulder to reveal a tempting stretch of bare skin. Nattawat's hands glide over his firm thighs, and he immediately notices the way Norawit's steady breathing falters at the simplest touch. He definitely enjoys it—but still, Norawit keeps brushing color into his hair with careful focus, as if none of this is affecting him at all.

"You know," Norawit mutters, pouting just a little, "I thought we'd be doing something else."

"If I hadn't distracted you, you would've refused to help me again," Nattawat replies with a smirk.

"I liked your old color. I got used to it."

"And I got used to your light brown," Nattawat says, admiring the freshly dyed strands. "It suits you. You look… incredible."

"You're hopelessly in love with me," Norawit says, leaning in to kiss just above his brow.

"Completely," Nattawat agrees, smiling as his gaze drifts over him again. "I missed my baby Gem. Fell for you once and never looked back."

"I think it's the other way around," Norawit murmurs with a grin.

He shivers slightly when cool fingers slip beneath his shirt, tracing along his waist in a teasing ripple. He exhales sharply, swallowing hard, trying to ignore it, but Nattawat doesn't make it easy. One hand slides up his stomach toward his chest while the other grips his hip firmly. He tilts his head back, brushing his lips along Norawit's jaw, but Norawit straightens, deliberately pulling away.

He shifts just enough, breathing slow and heavy, knowing exactly what he's doing. The effect on Nattawat is immediate—his thoughts blur, the tension between them flaring like it never left. As if it ever could.

Nattawat regrets this already. He should've just dragged him to bed from the start. He definitely didn't plan for Norawit to end up sitting on his lap, adjusting the dye like this. It's unfair.

"Baby, breathe," Norawit says with a smug smile. "I can feel you."

"I can't help it," Nattawat mutters, hands still wandering.

"You're both distracting me."

"Maybe that's the plan."

Norawit snorts softly. "We could take a break. Quick sex. You'll just end up a little spotted—creative, right?"

"Okay, okay, I'll behave," Nattawat says, though his hands settle firmly on Norawit's hips.

Norawit arches a brow, exhaling slowly. He's not exactly unaffected either—not sitting like this. His heart is racing, his thoughts drifting dangerously, imagining pushing him back against the sink behind them. It's getting harder to ignore.

Norawit leans forward to grab a towel, and Nattawat immediately presses his lips to his neck, breathing in that faintly sweet, watermelon scent. He leaves a trail of damp kisses, and Norawit responds by rolling his hips slightly, that same infuriating smirk on his lips.

Nattawat lets out a low, helpless sound.

"Maybe we should just forget this," he whispers, pulling him closer. "We can finish later…"

"No," Norawit says, pulling back with a smile. "You want a good result, don't you? I'm already nervous—it's my first time doing this. Hands to yourself."

"Just once?" Nattawat tries again.

"No."

"Half?"

"Stop negotiating. You'll get me later—properly. You did this to yourself."

"I didn't plan on you sitting on me like this," Nattawat groans.

"Thought you could outplay me?" Norawit teases. "No one beats me at this."

He dabs a bit of black paint onto Nattawat's nose. Nattawat retaliates immediately, smearing it onto Norawit's neck. Within seconds, they're both laughing, smudging paint across each

other's skin, the moment dissolving into something lighter, warmer.

Norawit's laughter rings out—bright, unrestrained—and it hits Nattawat harder than anything else. He hasn't heard that sound in so long. It fills something in his chest he didn't realize was still empty.

For a while, all they do is laugh, tease, and make a mess of each other. And somehow, that feels just as intimate.

Later, when the moment softens again, Nattawat wraps his arms around him.

"Your birthday's coming up," he says.

"No party," Norawit cuts in immediately.

"What about just the guys?"

"No."

Nattawat sighs, then smiles softly. "Okay. Then what do you want?"

"Nothing," Norawit shrugs. "Make me pancakes. Get ice cream. And in the evening…" He grins. "I'll have you instead of a gift."

Nattawat laughs. "That's just a regular Friday."

"Exactly. I don't need anything else."

Nattawat studies him for a moment, then quietly says, "You're everything to me, you know that?"

Norawit looks away, but doesn't argue.

When the dye is finally ready to wash out, the anticipation builds again—but this time, it's different. Softer. Warmer.

Norawit dries his hair, quiet for a long moment, studying the result.

"...Damn," he says under his breath.

Nattawat tenses. "What? Is it bad? Am I green? Bald?"

Norawit just smiles slowly.

"How are you this attractive with literally any color?" he murmurs, turning him around—and before Nattawat can respond, he's already kissing him again, deeper this time.

"Wait—let me at least look—"

"Later," Norawit interrupts, tugging his shirt off and settling back onto his lap. "I'll show you everything properly."

And just like that, everything else stops mattering again.

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Norawit wakes to a soft, rumbling purr that makes him smile before he even opens his eyes. Jumu pads slowly around the bed, circling him from every side, trying gently to wake him. The cat still hasn't quite gotten used to his owner's new routine.

Before, Norawit used to sleep just a few hours before dawn, then leave early for work. But now everything is different. Since coming back from the center, he's been trying to keep a normal schedule.

Like everyone else, he comes home from work, spends time with the person he loves, and sleeps soundly in his arms until morning. No more late nights in bars, no reckless racing, no fights with assholes—none of that mess. It was a firm recommendation from his therapist… and a request from his caring boyfriend that felt a lot like an order.

Nattawat was afraid that what happened that terrible day might destroy whatever was still alive inside him. And going against him on this wasn't really an option.

Norawit understood. He knew Nattawat was just worried.

They had gone through too much together—long stretches of depression, breakdowns, drinking binges. It had all felt like an endless cycle with no way out. But now, finally, things were getting better.

His boyfriend went to every appointment with him, never missing a single session. He would hold Norawit's fingers, grounding him, helping him stay calm. They did the therapist's exercises together, taking tiny steps toward healing.

Now, Norawit could smile again. He could enjoy small, simple moments—the kind that used to make him happy before. He could breathe without that constant ache in his chest. He knew he couldn't give up, no matter how hard it got.

North had wanted him to keep living. So, he was trying.

Norawit lets out a quiet laugh when Jumu insists on shoving his wet nose into his face, and he finally opens his eyes. He strokes the cat behind the ear, bumps his forehead lightly against him, then stretches lazily.

Wan comes running up immediately, tail wagging, asking for his share of morning affection. Somehow, the dog and the cat had gotten along surprisingly well—practically best friends.

From the slightly open window comes the soft sound of the ocean. A light breeze brushes against his bare skin, sending pleasant shivers down his body. The satisfied dog retreats to his bed, and Norawit sits at the edge of the mattress, leaning back on his hands.

He takes a deep breath of fresh air and sits there for a few minutes with his eyes closed, a foolish little smile on his face, simply enjoying the morning.

Nattawat isn't in bed. The apartment is suspiciously quiet… but the air is filled with the warm, familiar smell of sweet pastries.

Every morning, Nattawat makes pancakes or waffles for him. Usually, they eat together before heading to work. Looks like today he left early—but still made sure Norawit was taken care of.

The best boyfriend in the world.

Norawit pulls on his pants, turns on the TV just to break the silence, and walks barefoot down the hallway toward the kitchen, drawn by the smell.

As always, it's spotless—cleaner than the rest of the apartment. Nattawat never leaves a mess when he cooks.

On the table: a neat stack of pancakes drizzled with chocolate syrup, and a glass of orange juice—Norawit's favorite. It's impossible not to smile.

Next to the breakfast are two handwritten notes on colorful sticky papers:
"Eat me."
"Drink me."
Like something out of a Lewis Carroll story.

Every morning, Nattawat leaves him three small pills—his usual dose to help with depression, insomnia, and frayed nerves. Without them, Norawit knows he'd probably turn back to alcohol.

But that's strictly forbidden now. Alcohol, drugs, gambling—everything that once nearly destroyed them three years ago is off-limits.

Some habits, though, they still haven't been able to quit. Cigarettes.

Norawit eats breakfast with their pets, practically groaning with pleasure. It's so good his stomach rumbles in gratitude, and he can feel energy quickly returning to his body.

He takes his pills like he's supposed to and checks his phone.

His brows lift in surprise—then immediately knit together. Why is everyone looking for him this early?

Missed calls from friends. A message from Miss Monroe. And then…

It clicks when he reads a long wish from Lorette.

His birthday.

He forgot.

For the past three years, he hasn't celebrated it at all. It didn't feel like a holiday anymore—not without his brother.

How do you celebrate your own life when half your soul is gone?

You don't.

His friends kept trying to bring back their old tradition—big parties, cake, gifts—but Norawit always avoided it. He felt like he was supposed to share that day with North. Especially after his death.

Usually, he spent it at the cemetery, sitting for hours by the three graves of the people he loved most. Talking to them. Crying. Before rehab—drinking.

It brought him a strange kind of peace… even if the pain came back twice as strong.

And today, he planned to do the same.

But it seems his boyfriend had other ideas.

Suddenly, Nattawat's voice calls his name from outside.

Norawit raises his eyebrows, then smiles.

Strange. Instead of waking him with kisses, he ran off and is now shouting from the street.

Let him shout.

Nattawat calls again, and starts tossing small pebbles at the window.

Norawit stays right where he is, smiling to himself, though his patience is wearing thin. He secretly enjoys hearing all the affectionate nicknames Nattawat uses, trying to lure him to the window.

By now, at least a few neighbors are probably glaring out their windows.

Whatever. Half the building already hates them for being too loud.

"Come on, baby! Just look out the window!" Nattawat calls.

Norawit takes his time, finishing his breakfast, then finally walks over and opens the blinds.

"Norawit Titicharoenrak! Get your perfect ass up and look at me, I've been waiting for—"

"What do you want, Romeo?" Norawit calls back, opening the window.

Nattawat grins. "You're awake, handsome."

“Yep. Already had breakfast too,” Norawit says, lighting a cigarette.

“So, you were ignoring me?!”

“I was enjoying the food. It was really good, by the way. Thanks. Why are you yelling? People are still sleeping—it’s a day off.”

“Happy birthday, my love!” Nattawat beams, blowing him kisses.

“Thanks, baby. But I’d be happier if I woke up next to you.”

“I was planning to kiss you to death after your surprise.”

“Mmm,” Norawit hums. “Alright, you’re forgiven—if you did a good job.”

“Can you close your eyes?”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes. Otherwise, it’s not a surprise.”

“…Fine.”

Norawit closes his eyes, breathing in the salty air, feeling the warm California sun on his skin. The breeze brushes through his hair as he waits.

Whatever Nattawat is doing—it’s already adorable.

“Open them,” Nattawat says.

Norawit looks down, and his heart stutters.

Nattawat stands below with a guitar in his hands, pushing his hair back, smiling that devastating smile of his.

No way.

Is he seriously about to serenade him?

The melody begins—soft, warm, beautiful.

People on the street slow down, watching, some even pulling out their phones. It feels like a scene from a romantic movie.

Nattawat sings, his voice gentle and full, sending shivers down Norawit’s arms.

Norawit leans further out the window, smiling wider than he has in a long time.

Right now, he isn’t thinking about anything bad.

He’s just… happy.

Truly happy.

Loved.

Seen.

Like the whole world has been placed at his feet—at least in the eyes of the one person who matters most.

“For as long as I live and as long as I love…” Nattawat sings, looking up at him.

“Hey Nattawat Jirochtikul,” Norawit calls softly, waiting for the line to end. “I love you so much.”

Nattawat smiles so wide his words blur a little—but it only makes it sweeter.

“I will never not think about you,” he finishes, then lowers the guitar. “I love you, Norawit Titicharoenrak.”

“A serenade, huh?”

“Did you like it?”

“Messy,” Norawit smirks. “But I’m satisfied.”

From somewhere above, a few scattered claps and whistles break out.

Nattawat laughs and gives a small bow like a performer. Norawit watches him with the softest, most loving gaze.

He’s so lucky.

After everything they’ve been through… they’re still here. Still together.

And somehow, still choosing each other every single day.

Between them, they truly have everything needed to keep their feelings from ever fading. People say love only lasts three years, and then it turns into habit, but that rule doesn’t apply to them at all. Their love only grows stronger. It’s wild, unstoppable, and utterly unique. One of a kind in the entire world, and they are the only ones who possess it.

If someone had told him a few years ago that he’d become this dependent on another person, he never would have believed it. He probably would have just laughed it off. And now, all he can think about is that he wants to live only with him, and only for him.

“Let’s get married,” Titicharoenrak suddenly says, looking at him.

“What? I didn’t catch that,” Nattawat laughs.

“Baby, let’s get married,” Norawit repeats, louder this time.

“Do what?” he teases again, pretending not to understand. “Say it louder.”

“Marry me!”

“And the ring?”

“Five more seconds and I’m taking it back.”

“You’re proposing just like that?” Nattawat smirks.

“I don’t see a reason to wait even one more day. You save me just by existing every damn day, and I want you to be mine. ‘No’ isn’t really an option for you, you know that, right? But I guess I’m supposed to ask properly—so, do you agree?”

“Properly, you’re supposed to get down on one knee and give me a ring, baby.”

“And what are rules for?” he grins. “Exactly—to break them.”

Nattawat watches him for a few seconds with a mysterious smile, then bursts into laughter. He’s clearly a little thrown off by the proposal, but not scared, just breathless from how unexpected it is. He’d planned to give gifts today, not to receive the birthday boy himself as a gift for the rest of his life.

He smirks at his own thoughts, shakes his head, then suddenly runs toward the fire escape by their building. He climbs it quickly, taking the steps two at a time, hearing Norawit’s bright laughter. He stops right by their kitchen window and almost loses his footing, his legs nearly give out at the sight of him.

So effortlessly beautiful. Naturally radiant. And dangerously attractive.

Titicharoenrak knows it too, and smirks with quiet satisfaction when he catches that hungry look wandering over his half-bare body.

Nattawat tucks a strand of hair behind his ear and settles more comfortably on the metal landing, just to watch him. For a long moment, he simply stares at the love of his life, unable to convince himself this isn’t some perfect dream. The person he loves with all his soul wants to take this serious step with him.

Of course, he wants it just as much. Desperately.

But there’s one problem.

Until they change something in their life together, Norawit will never truly be happy. And to take that leap into the future, he has to face his past.

“You’re being awfully quiet… I’m starting to get nervous. You don’t want to?” Norawit asks, narrowing his eyes.

“I have one condition,” Nattawat replies seriously.

“And that is?”

“We leave this place.”

Titicharoenrak frowns immediately, visibly caught off guard as he processes what he just heard. He knew this conversation would come sooner or later, Nattawat had been talking about traveling a lot lately, like he was preparing him. Now it’s clear why.

“Baby, but—”

“I get it,” Nattawat says gently. “Your past is holding you here. I know. But you can’t start a new life if you don’t let it go. You understand that, right?” He sighs softly. “I want to be with you more than anything, and I’m not going anywhere. But if you want us to get married, this is my condition. I’ve never set conditions before, even when I should have. I don’t like doing it… but otherwise I can’t push you forward.”

He pauses, then adds more quietly, “A new stage in our relationship means a new life. I’m not asking you to forget everything—that’s impossible. Healing will take time, and I’m ready to wait with you as long as it takes. I just… want to help you move forward. But for that, you need to take this step.”

“Will it even help?” Norawit asks softly, lowering his gaze.

“I don’t know. No one does. But staying here—you’re drowning in those thoughts more and more. You see that yourself. It’s obvious what you’re holding onto so desperately. You’re afraid that the bubble you’re living in will burst… but that’s exactly what needs to happen.”

“You’re right,” Norawit admits quietly. “I’m scared to step outside it. It feels like there’s nothing beyond it… Like here, he’s still close. Like he’s just out somewhere, having fun like always, and I’ll see him later.”

“You can’t live like that,” Nattawat says softly, taking his hand. “He’ll be with you no matter where you go. Always. But you need to break these walls. Everything here reminds you of your brother—the café, the beach, the races… even the cemetery. You keep going back to his house. I know it’s hard. But you have to try. You want to get out of this, don’t you?”

“I do,” Norawit whispers, nodding slowly.

“And he would want that too. You have to let this place go. It’s consuming you. You’ve lost too much here… everything. What’s keeping you in LA? Give me one reason you have to stay.”

“You.”

Nattawat laces their fingers together.
“I’ll hold your hand and walk beside you wherever you go. I’ll never let go. Not ever. Whatever path you choose—I’ll follow.”

“And if I choose to stay?”

“I’ll still be with you.”

“But then we won’t get married?”

“No.”

“Never?” Norawit asks, frowning like a child.

Nattawat shakes his head.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to build a family on ruins and bones. We have everything we need to be strong—we’ve built it piece by piece, remember? But here… you’re not okay. No matter how hard I try, it still hurts you. And it hurts me to see that. I want to save you, baby. Just let me. I think a new place will help you breathe again. Step beyond the world you’ve built. Do it for him. For me. For yourself.”

Norawit exhales shakily, biting the inside of his cheek. It feels impossibly hard. Leave everything behind? This city holds his entire life… but Nattawat is right. It also holds everything he’s lost. That’s what’s anchoring him here.

He’s terrified that beyond this place, in the unknown, things might be worse.

But maybe… that’s exactly where his salvation is.

“We’ll take Jumu and Wan,” Nattawat continues softly, kissing his hand, “and find a place that’s ours. Somewhere warm, safe, peaceful. Not too far—we’ll still see our friends. But I want us to have our own place… where you can finally feel at ease.”

“I want that… I just—it's scary,” Norawit admits.

“Trust me. I haven’t let you down so far, have I?” Nattawat smiles gently. “I plan to make you happy for the rest of your life. Everything will be okay. We just have to take the risk. Together.”

“Okay,” Norawit whispers, nodding. “I want to do it. With you. But first—we’re getting married.”

“Today, if you want,” Nattawat replies softly before kissing him. “I’ve already been yours for a long time.”

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In the small room where Nattawat stood alone with his quiet, fluttering nerves, the lighting was soft and easy on the eyes. The roof of the little chapel narrowed toward its peak, though the ceilings weren't particularly high. This was no grand cathedral or lavish church. There was no overwhelming luxury here—just something modest, intimate, and beautiful in its own way. Everything was made of wood, and the air carried its scent: dry timber with a faint trace of paraffin from the few candles burning near the altar.

He shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, the thick soles of his shoes creaking against the old floorboards. Somewhere off to the side, a man played the piano on a small raised platform, singing a beautiful song live. The short aisle was empty, as were the pews meant for guests. They hadn't invited anyone—except for Night. It was a quiet, private wedding, decided on a whim after they had rushed off to Las Vegas just days after Norawit's birthday.

Despite the blaze of neon lights, the city was perfect for a couple who didn't want attention. Quick weddings were nothing unusual here; no one stared, no one asked questions. And that was exactly what they wanted for their new life—peace.

There were so many chapels here, each with its own unique kind of romance. Some were old, some modern—the variety was astonishing. There were no limits to how beautiful or memorable a wedding could be. The choices were overwhelming, honestly. But in the end, they chose something small and old—something at least a little traditional. The Little Church of the West was incredibly elegant and romantic, with a rich history by American standards. What drew them in even more was its location near the world-famous "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign. They'd have photos to remember this day forever.

Even though it was the oldest chapel on the Las Vegas Strip, it was meticulously cared for. Inside and out, it felt warm and atmospheric. The combination of polished redwood and Victorian-style chandeliers made it seem like stepping into another era.

Nattawat glanced at his watch again and let out a heavy breath. The ceremony was in five minutes… and Norawit still wasn't there.

They had both, in their stupidity, forgotten to pick up their marriage license. For them, this was real—it mattered that everything was official. It had taken him a long time to convince Titicharoenrak to leave everything behind in Los Angeles and start over. Soon, they planned to move to San Francisco—a place of freedom, where people lived without prejudice. Perfect for rebels like them.

It was one of the most beautiful and relatively calm cities in California. Somehow, despite its size, it always felt like a small town rather than a sprawling metropolis of millions. It was exactly what they had dreamed of. They didn't want to disappear into some quiet nowhere—they both still wanted to build something, to become something—but they craved peace at the same time.

Nattawat had already started gathering documents to apply for college. He wanted, finally, to pursue what truly mattered to him—music.

Their new home came with one notable feature: the steep, almost intimidating streets. There'd be no reckless street racing there. They'd have to leave that behind—and Nattawat was willing to, for him. He loved adrenaline, sure. But if they were starting over, it had to be like this. And honestly, he'd had enough racing at "Powerslide" to last a lifetime. If he ever needed to let off steam, he could always drive out of the city—or visit his favorite track back in Los Angeles.

But San Francisco was full of inspiration. Built across hills by the bay, it felt uniquely cozy and breathtaking. The ocean was still close—that mattered most to both of them. They said the air there always smelled fresh and sharp, and the sea fog that rolled in gave the city a quiet, romantic atmosphere. Nattawat couldn't wait to take his future husband to the Golden Gate Bridge and stand there together, taking in the view.

Los Angeles wasn't exactly close—about five hundred kilometers by highway. Satang, Phu, and Pahn had decided to stay behind. Someone had to look after "The Loop." It wasn't just a place—it was a memory, a legacy. It had been their best friend's life's work. They couldn't let it fade away. Pond meant too much to all of them.

The move saddened them, of course, but they understood it was necessary. Most of all, Norawit needed it. Staying in L.A. would have suffocated him with grief. So, they made a promise: they'd visit each other often. A few hundred kilometers on an open road? That was nothing for them.

Night, however, chose to go with them. He planned to run his club independently and grow his business in the new city. He was already laying the groundwork and would join them in a couple of months. Neither Nattawat nor Norawit wanted to let him go far. They had grown incredibly close, close enough that he was the witness at their wedding. The only one who even knew about it.

"God, would you relax?" Night said, walking down the aisle toward him. "He'll be here."

"We've got two minutes left," Nattawat exhaled tensely.

"Wait… you're seriously getting married in that?" Night laughed, gesturing at his outfit. "I look more like the groom than you do."

Nattawat glanced down at his jeans and white T-shirt, then adjusted the collar of his unbuttoned dark blue plaid shirt.

"What's wrong with it? I put on a shirt," he said, genuinely confused.

"You could've worn something classic for once," his brother rolled his eyes. "It's your wedding, idiot."

"Shut up. I'm only here to make him my husband as fast as possible—and for some reason, he's still not here," Nattawat muttered, running a hand through his black hair. "Where the hell is he? What if something happened?"

“Or maybe he changed his mind?” Night smirked, crossing his arms. “I would’ve, seeing you dressed like that. You looked the same at the track last week.”

Nattawat flipped him off with a scrunched expression.

“Have some respect, we’re in a chapel,” Night laughed.

“Oh, screw you—”

“So, where is your groom, Mr. Jirochtikul?” asked the Elvis impersonator who was supposed to marry them.

“Seems like he’s running late,” Nattawat shrugged awkwardly.

“Yeah, or he bailed,” Night added, and immediately got elbowed hard in the side.

“We can reschedule your ceremony,” Elvis offered. “There’s an opening later tonight, if you’d like—”

“No! I’m here! Don’t move anything!” Norawit’s voice rang out as he rushed down the aisle, documents clutched in his hands. “I’m here. We’re not rescheduling.”

“Got the license?” Elvis asked.

“Yes, everything’s fine,” Norawit breathed out, smiling as he handed over the papers. The man stepped away to check them. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“I was worried,” Nattawat frowned softly. “I was losing my mind.”

He gently brushed back Norawit’s slightly damp, brown hair, then cupped his face and kissed him. Completely forgetting that this was their wedding—and that they were supposed to wait—they melted into each other without hesitation.

Night glanced over Norawit’s heavy boots, black jeans, and T-shirt, barely holding back a smile.

God, they were exactly the same. Two people sharing one brain cell. Neither of them had bothered dressing up at all, while he looked like he’d shown up for a royal wedding.

But none of that really mattered.

What mattered were their smiles.

This was their day—and they wanted it just like this: simple, quiet, and unpretentious. No glitter, no grand traditions… aside from the chapel itself.

North would have loved all of this. It was so him.
The young man smiles softly at the thought, then looks away—the reckless way those two are kissing is starting to make him blush. He hopes Norawit’s younger brother is somewhere

nearby, feeling the same quiet happiness and pride for his older brother. Because honestly… it's something incredible—to find the one person you want to spend your whole life with.

"Hey, you two, take it easy. There's a motel across the street," Elvis says with a raspy laugh. "Shall we begin?"

"Yes," Titicharoenrak replies, pulling away from his boyfriend's lips.

"The sooner, the better," Natt adds with a grin.

"Your documents are in order. So, when you walk out of here, you'll officially be married. Rings?" the man asks, then frowns. "Oh—wait, you didn't give me any rings. You can buy some here—"

"Oh, we've got our own," Nattawat says, and they both raise their hands.

For several days now, ring tattoos have adorned their ring fingers—something they designed together, something Nattawat inked himself. They had both decided it would mean far more than any piece of precious metal. These rings couldn't be lost or taken off. They would stay with them forever, etched into their skin every second of their lives—one of a kind. Just like their love.

"Wow. Original," Elvis nods approvingly. "Well then, everything's in order. We have a witness for formality…"

"And what about guests?" Phuwin asks. "Are they allowed, or do they need some damn permit too?"

Norawit and Nattawat turn toward the entrance at the sound of his voice, then exchange bright smiles. Phu and Satang walk Pahn down the aisle, flanking her on both sides, before stopping beside Night, who shrugs sheepishly. It was him who told them about the ceremony—who invited them, knowing the couple would want to share this moment with their closest people. As always, he took full responsibility. And judging by the looks on their faces, the guys couldn't be happier to see them.

"Well, well. And who's getting married here?" Phuwin scoffs. "So quiet, so modest—not a word to anyone. And you still call yourselves my best friends? Unbelievable…"

"Shh, baby," Pahn whispers. "We're in a chapel."

"I'm a sinner, sweetheart, what can I do?" he shrugs. "You two—" he points at them, "—I'm seriously pissed, got it? You didn't invite me to your wedding. Do you realize how rare this is? Two idiots like you finding each other? I'm basically the Cupid of your relationship!"

"You're exaggerating, old man. We cupid-ed ourselves," Norawit laughs.

"Traitors don't get to speak," Phu shoots back, glaring, before breaking into a smile and looking at Nattawat. "Him, I get. But you, Natt?"

“We just didn’t want to drag you away from your vacation,” Nattawat says. “And we didn’t want to wait anymore.”

“And what about me?” Satang cuts in. “I was right there! We closed the shop together yesterday and you didn’t say a word about getting married today. Some best friend you are—I’m revoking your title for twenty-four hours.”

“Okay, okay, we’re guilty. Let’s deal with that later—you’re ruining the moment,” Titicharoenrak says, taking Nattawat’s hand. “We’re already running out of time.”

The others laugh quietly and take seats in the front row, watching like the most honored guests—ones who invited themselves.

The ceremony is surprisingly easy, light, and quick. Elvis delivers amusing remarks in his crisp white suit, even singing live. Old romantic songs from the ’70s and ’80s play softly in the background, the perfect finishing touch.

This day—this moment—will stay with them forever. Norawit and Nattawat will carry it in the most sacred place in their hearts, remembering every second. It’s one of the happiest days of their new life together, and they plan to have at least ten thousand more just like it.

No more addictions. No crushing debts. No reckless races or dangerous friends. They leave it all behind the moment they sign their names. Crossing that final line, they become a family—and there’s no room for the past there.

They are free. They are happy.

Even if Norawit still has a long way to go before he can fully feel that happiness, he has Nattawat. And Nattawat will walk beside him, never letting go of his hand again.

Only ten minutes later, they reach the vows.

Neither of them prepared anything. They just planned to speak from the heart, whatever came in the moment.

Norawit goes first.

He exhales, nervous, turning to face Nattawat and gently taking his hands. He looks into those wide eyes, shining with so much love that his heart nearly stops.

“I can’t believe I only convinced you to marry me now,” he begins softly, smiling, “and not that night—our date in Ojai, under the open sky, when you first told me you loved me. In your own way… not directly. But it was the most romantic thing I’d ever heard. That phrase—it became ours because of you. I didn’t even know it before.”

He pauses, breath catching.

“My feelings have only grown since then. Sometimes it scares me… how endless they feel. But at the same time—I love it. As someone who’s never loved before, I can say this for sure—I got lucky.”

His voice softens.

“I’m lucky to love you. And to be loved by you. That’s a privilege in this world. Not everyone finds it—you know how hard it is. Just wanting love isn’t enough.”

He squeezes his hands gently.

“I used to wonder… is it possible to spend your whole life with someone? And now I know—it is. If it’s the right person. Someone who loves you in every version of yourself. Kind and cruel. Broken and whole. Sober and drunk. Sick and healthy. Just… you. Because to them, you’re always the best.”

A breath. A quiet confession:

“And I found that person.”

Nattawat nods, already trembling.

“Do you remember,” Norawit continues softly, “when I said someone would drown you in their love?”

A nod.

“I didn’t know back then how badly I’d want to be that person. But you… you give me everything without asking for anything in return. Do you even realize what you mean to me?”

His voice breaks.

“You changed my life the moment you jumped into your car trying to run, and I chased you. I had no idea I was chasing the love of my life. But the second I looked into your eyes… I think I already knew I was done for.”

He smiles through it.

“And I’ve never been more right.”

Nattawat lets out a shaky laugh, overwhelmed, holding onto every word like something sacred he’ll carry forever.

And for the first time, their playful vow starts to feel like something deeper, like a confession of a lifetime.

And he realizes, with absolute certainty:

Marrying him… was the right choice.

Norawit watches him with quiet awe, unable to look away. Once again, he finds himself drowning in those eyes, absorbing every word as if they breathe new life into him. Nattawat isn’t often this open about his feelings, and that’s exactly what makes this moment so precious. Norawit doesn’t want to miss a single thing he says.

“My premonition of love,” Nattawat murmurs thoughtfully, glancing down at their intertwined hands. “I’ve told you this before, but I’ll say it again. You weren’t love at first sight for me… but you became it at second. The moment I stepped past my own fears and kissed you for the first time, there was no turning back. Before you, all of this felt so distant, so foreign, that now it almost makes me laugh.”

He exhales softly, lifting his gaze.

“You, more than anyone, know how difficult the road to my heart was. But you walked it. You’re the only one who knows how hard it was for me to let you in. Just a little over three years ago, I could barely say out loud what I felt for you. But you taught me how to love. Because of you, I’ve come this far. Now I can say things like this without fear, to the people who matter most.”

He glances briefly at his brother before continuing.

“You’re right. We went through hell together. Most people don’t go through half of what we did in a lifetime… and yet, here we are. I don’t regret any of it, because it led us to this moment. We’ve always completed each other. Sometimes I was stronger—but mostly, it was you. We caught each other when we fell. We kept each other going. That’s what it means to be someone’s anchor.”

His hand gestures softly around them.

“And looking at you… at our friends… at all of this—I know this is only the beginning for us. Life keeps moving forward, no matter what. And I want to live it with you.”

“You’re perfect,” Norawit whispers, smiling at him with pure sincerity.

“I’m yours. And if you promise to take care of my heart, I’ll never hurt yours. You know relationships mean something different to me. You know I need every piece in place to be happy. So, let’s make this our ‘happily ever after.’ I don’t want to lose you, or what we have.”

“You…” Norawit starts, then falters, remembering words Nattawat had said long ago, half a joke at the time, something he’d once asked him to repeat at their wedding. And now he had. “Damn it… you actually remembered.”

“I love you, Norawit Titicharoenrak. Yesterday, now, and in every moment of our forever,” Nattawat says, pressing a kiss to his ring finger.

They don’t wait for the officiant to tell them they can kiss. They break the rules without hesitation. Their lips meet in the most tender, long-awaited kiss, surrounded by the applause of the people they love most and the official words:

“Your marriage is now legally registered.”

“Wow,” Night says, smiling proudly at his brother.

“How many times am I going to cry because of you two today?” Pahn grumbles, wiping her tears again as everyone laughs. “I hate you. And I love you.”

“So, you’re next,” Satang nudges Phuwin. “Go on.”

“Yeah, let’s just get it over with so we don’t have to come back twice,” the younger Jirochtikul adds.

“Oh, absolutely not,” Phuwin protests. “I want a *proper* wedding. A dress, rings, a grand hall, flowers everywhere—”

“Hey, Mr. Newlywed Millionaire,” he adds, turning to Nattawat. “Mind lending me a couple hundred thousand? Important business. My best friend’s dream wedding is on the line.”

Nattawat barely pulls away from Norawit’s lips, wrapping his arms around his neck while Norawit’s hands tighten around his waist.

“Take it all if you want. Anything for Pahn. She saved my life,” he says without hesitation.

“Ours,” his husband corrects gently.

“Right. Ours. More than once.”

“Well, damn,” Phu laughs. “I was kind of hoping—”

“Alright then, we’ll meet at our wedding,” Pahn says, kissing his cheek. “In a couple of years.”

“Perfect woman. Understands everything instantly,” he grins.

Soon, everyone is busy taking photos, giving the newlyweds a bit of space before the celebration begins. Nattawat watches them, laughing softly. It feels different, better, having the people they love all around them.

But in that moment, Norawit sees only him.

In his hands, he holds the meaning of his life. This man has been saving him every day since the moment he shamelessly stole gasoline from his bike. God… if only Nattawat hadn’t lost that card game to Pond back then, if not for that ridiculous dare, none of this would have begun.

And yet, from that very second, their wild love story had started.

Now, after everything they’d been through, they stood on the edge of a new life.

For the first time, Norawit looks at him as his husband, and it almost doesn’t feel real. Is this happiness? The purest kind imaginable.

Even though his heart aches with a deep, quiet sorrow that North isn’t here to share this moment, he’s still happy. His younger brother may be gone, but that doesn’t mean he’s disappeared. As long as he’s remembered, he lives on—in his heart, in his soul.

Norawit likes to believe that somewhere nearby, North is watching with a proud smile, knowing his sacrifice wasn't in vain. That he's finally at peace, somewhere with their parents.

And deep down, Norawit knows it's true.

Their unspoken rule had always worked both ways: if the older brother is happy, so is the younger—and vice versa.

And Norawit is happy.

North had known, even back then, that entrusting Norawit's life to Nattawat was the right choice. Because right now, the two of them are glowing—eyes shining, hearts beating as one, smiles they can't hide.

They had built this, piece by piece: chemistry, understanding, honesty, trust, love. Brick by brick, they created their "happily ever after." And now, that foundation is unbreakable.

Nattawat turns to his husband, looking at him with quiet admiration. He gently cups his cheek, brushing his thumb over soft skin, savoring the warmth of the embrace he loves most in this world.

"Hi, baby," he whispers, smiling.

"Hi," Norawit replies, smiling back.

"You're my husband now," Nattawat says, kissing him softly.

"And you're mine."

"I still can't believe it."

"Are you happy?"

"Happier than I've ever been," Nattawat answers without hesitation. "And you?"

"Yesterday, now… and in every moment of our forever," Norawit says.

Dedication:
To those who have once been disappointed in love
Don't be afraid to open your heart again.

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